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The space between us: Researching student and teacher understandings of significant and influential student-teacher relationships

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Abstract

A growing body of literature reveals that all people, especially the young, need to experience relationships that promote safety, trust, belonging and connectedness to other humans, in order to develop and reach their potential. Particularly for students holding negative self-constructs or lacking confidence within school contexts, a caring teacher may represent the single most influential relationship available to a young person at that time. Research links the development of significant and influential student–teacher relationships with experiences of student success, the development of positive self-beliefs and improved wellbeing. Despite this, the New Zealand Ministry of Education make little reference to student–teacher relationships (significant or otherwise) within their latest Strategic Intentions, prioritising instead, improved attendance, achievement and system stewardship. At a time when New Zealand has been ranked last out of 36 OECD countries for overall child mental health, a clear gap has emerged between the educational intent of the Government and the social and emotional needs of the students in this country.

Within an interpretative phenomenological framework this study used semi-structured individual and focus group interviews to explore the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships (STRs) for six Year 13 students and four secondary school teachers, in the lower South Island of New Zealand. The study also considered the influence that such connections had on the development of student self-beliefs and their experiences of competence and self-worth. Connections between STRs and an ethic of care in education was also explored.

Characteristics of STRs described by participants fell within two key areas. The first area described the importance of authentic connections between students and their significant teachers. These were demonstrated by students feeling noticed, the exchange of meaningful dialogue, the provision of teacher time and student experiences of unconditional teacher acceptance. The second key area related to the establishment of relational equity within the STR. This was interpreted through the co-construction of student–teacher connections, teacher role flexibility and overarching student experiences of safety and trust. Participants in this study also presented compelling evidence that STRs positively influenced student self-beliefs and promoted better academic, socio-emotional and wellbeing outcomes. All students participating in this research reported significant and positive personal growth from the formations of their STR.

The Space Within model, developed from this study, is offered as one possible interpretation of how student self-beliefs may be influenced by significant teacher relationships. A further finding from this study suggested that the emotional labour required of teachers in maintaining significant student connections without systemic support, occurred at the expense of that teacher's own wellbeing, raising concerns regarding the sustainability of teachers supporting students in this way.

This thesis provides a comprehensive and nuanced view of relationships considered significant and influential to students at the conclusion of their secondary school experience. It raises implications for both teachers and school leadership. Recommendations from this study encourage the provision of teacher professional development and resourcing to support and maintain STRs in schools.

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Abbreviations and Definitions

- I. Where direct quotes have been referenced from participants in this study, the italicised lower-case letters 's' or 't' are used following their names, to indicate if the participant is a student or a teacher respectively.
- II. **Interpretative phenomenology** will be referred to within the text of this thesis using the initials **IP**.
- III. **Interpretative phenomenological analysis** will be referred to within the text of this thesis using the initials **IPA**.
- IV. **Ka Hikitia**. Meaning to step up or to lift your step in order to lengthen your stride (Ministry of Education, 2013).
- V. **Kotahitanga**. This refers to the Māori notion of solidarity or unity, especially when a group is working towards a common goal.
- VI. **Manaakitanga**. Refers to the Māori construct of caring which encompasses aspects of hospitality, kindness and respect for the needs of others.
- VII. **Te ao Māori**. This term refers to a Māori world views or holistic ways of seeing things that are culturally embedded in such things as language, traditions and spiritual beliefs and are specific to the indigenous people of New Zealand.
- VIII. **Significant and influential student–teacher relationships** will be referred to within the text of this thesis using the initials **STR**.
- IX. **Whānau**. Refers to the Māori construct of family or extended family or a close community who share a common connection.
- X. **Whanaungatanga**. This Māori term has a meaning which relates to the close connections or relationships developed between people who share similar experiences. Whanaungatanga may contribute to a sense of belonging within a group.

Prologue

Ask almost any adult for their most influential schooling experience and they will invariably speak of a relationship. An exchange in space and time, when words, actions and emotion connected to lift or dash them in a moment of absolute significance. When such moments involve teachers, students are not simply receiving educational commodities, they are engaging in connections which hold the potential to shape how they see the world and their place within it (Denton, 2008).

Having worked with students and teachers within the New Zealand secondary school system for over 30 years, I have had the privilege of watching powerful and transformative relational spaces develop between some students and their teachers. Throughout this time, I've wondered at the processes that appeared to join some and separate others. I wanted to know what mattered most to students forming these connections with their teachers and how these relationships influenced the things students believed about themselves?

I believe that the lived experience of student–teacher relationships represent an important and influential phenomenon worthy of deeper exploration. Better understanding of these significant student–teacher connections has the potential not only to change student outcomes during their school experience but also influence the wider beliefs they hold about themselves. This research endeavoured to tell the story of ten participants who experienced these types of connections every day in New Zealand schools. In doing so, the visibility of these relational spaces are improved (Creely et al., 2021). Reading the literature and speaking to colleagues on this topic galvanised my curiosity regarding the characteristics of these most significant of relationships and started me on the road of this research project.

As a qualified counsellor and past adolescent and family therapist, I brought the multiple lenses of adolescent mental health, teaching and senior school leadership to my researcher role. In an attempt to avoid role confusion whilst navigating the position of researcher, questions have focussed on the relational dynamics specific to students and teacher associations within a secondary school context.

Listening to those who are part of any lived experience contributes to the building of understanding. I believe that whilst engaging both teachers and students as research participants, it was important to hold a student centric lens throughout this study. In doing so, this research validated student definitions of their significant teacher connections and those features which

established them as “significant” (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p. 129) and influential to them. Using semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, rich and deep narratives of these relational experiences have been assembled, themes identified and data presented for later discussion.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The Changing Landscape of Relationships in Education

The field of New Zealand education has changed significantly over the years and certainly in the 35 years which spans my teaching career. In my experience, one of these changes surrounds the growing understanding that teaching is not simply a dissemination of information, where students represent empty vessels waiting to be filled. Whilst teaching responsibilities such as curriculum delivery and assessment obviously remain important expectations of the role, the art of teaching itself, is fundamentally a relational process and interactions between students and teachers can significantly influence the beliefs students form about themselves (McGraw et al., 2025). However, despite this growing awareness within the profession, the processes by which student-teacher relationships effect change in the lives of students and the significance of these connections are not always well understood (Wentzel, 2022).

This study explored the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how this relational space was understood by six Year 13 students and four teachers from lower South Island secondary schools in New Zealand. By focussing on the lived experiences of students and teachers forming such relationships, it sought to tell the story of why these connections hold such significance for students and how they contribute to the development of positive self-beliefs. This study attempted to illuminate the student–teacher relational space, growing understanding of its importance to student wellbeing and presenting an opportunity to make “visible that which may have been previously invisible” (Creely et al., 2021, p. xviii).

1.2 Significant Student–Teacher Relationships (STRs) in Education

STRs have the ability to influence a student’s sense of self and contribute powerfully (either positively or negatively) to their perceptions of the world they navigate (Martin & Collie, 2019; McFarland et al., 2016; McGraw et al., 2025; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). By definition, all students who have progressed through a school system have experienced teaching relationships, though not all significant and certainly not all positive. While the universality of this experience may breed a familiarity for many, the “surprising lack of literature investigating the link between specific teacher–student relationship practices and student wellbeing” (El-Sayed, 2022, p. 5) has meant that these most familiar of experiences are still not well understood. Using an interpretative phenomenological

lens, this study has explored the nature and landscape of STRs and provides an important addition to the empirical understandings of these most influential of adolescent connections.

Within the literary discussions of positive and relational approaches to teaching sourced as part of this study, the word 'care' seemed inextricably woven into the fabric of common experiences and research outcomes. While expressions of care within an educational context may extend beyond individual relationships (care for a system or a perspective for instance), I considered care (from one individual to another) as foundational to the formation and maintenance of the STRs explored in this study. The consideration of care within relationships of significance was therefore important within the context of this study and is discussed next.

1.2.1 Human Need for Relationship and the Role of Care

All humans have a fundamental desire to belong and require relationships that are unconditional, positive and significant in order to achieve this connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2023; Rogers, 1957; Rosenblatt, 2017; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). A number of authors and researchers working in the area of relationships and connections have developed frameworks to consider the relational needs of humans. These include such authors as Maslow (1973) (hierarchy of needs), Deci and Ryan (1985) (self-determination theory), Bowlby (1978) and Ainsworth (1979) (attachment theory). The Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist (and holocaust survivor) Viktor Emil Frankl also explored the power of relationships and founded a form of existential analysis called 'Logotherapy' (Frankl, 1967). Through the experience of the holocaust, Frankl (2006) came to believe that the circumstances in people's lives (many of which are out of their control), do not define them nearly as much as their attitude towards those same circumstances. Frankl used the word 'love' (in terms of the love for his fellow human beings), saying "the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true" (Frankl, 2006, pp. 111-112). Frankl used this definition of love to argue in favour of the transformative power of care in relationships.

Another seminal author in the field of human relationships was the psychologist and psychotherapist Carl Rogers. Rogers (1957) founded the humanistic approach to psychotherapy known as client centred therapy (later called person centred therapy) in the mid 20th century. He considered the concept of 'unconditional positive regard' to be one of the core conditions required if a client's personality was to change. Rogers' humanistic approach to education was an important

adjunct to the understandings sought as part of this study's exploration of the student–teacher relationship. His approach to education, particularly the important notions of autonomy and the development of trust within student–teacher connections, were hugely influential to the development of modern educational thinking.

1.2.2 The Need for Caring Student–Teacher Connections Within Schools

As I discussed the notion of student–teacher connection with one of the Principals I worked with, I watched their reaction to the possibility that schools could attend more to the concept of caring relationships between students and staff. I sensed from their line of questioning that the term ‘care’ was being interpreted as something soft, indefinable, ethereal and with few empirical means of measurement. From further discussion, the idea that educators might begin to focus on concepts that they saw as vague and difficult to measure seemed almost threatening compared to the much clearer academic and behavioural goals of the school. Little wonder according to Huffman (2005) who summarised a similar response when writing “whatever the reason, the teaching profession relies on a generalised use of the terms ‘care’ or ‘caring’ that relegates the terms to the qualities of being kind, concerned, or thoughtful” (p. 2). When Chang (2019) described caring as a “warm, fuzzy feeling that is somewhat intangible” (p. 2), it was easy to understand why many educators have struggled with definitive concepts of care.

Principal conversations such as the one above, highlighted the importance of exploring the STR so that descriptions may become both meaningful and accessible to teaching professionals. The work of Noddings (1984, 1992, 2018) and the formation of her ‘ethic of care’ was considered seminal in the exploration of caring between students and teachers according to authors such as Jackson et al. (2023) and Tuckwiller et al. (2024). Noddings (2013) considered the development of genuine caring between student and teacher to be foundational to successful teacher–student relationships. She also maintained that such relationships linked strongly to Rogers’ notion of unconditionality, asserting that ‘the cared-for’ should enjoy “unconditional care” (Noddings, 2018, p. 228). Noddings’ work has been highly influential to the theoretical framework of this study (to be explored in more depth during Chapters Two and Three) and her linking of influential and significant teaching relationships to teacher extensions of care, is now considered to be well established (Jackson et al., 2023; Saha et al., 2023; Tuckwiller et al., 2024). While the work of Noddings and others has extended over many decades now, Principal responses such as that referenced earlier, highlight the gap between current educational practice and the increasing literature (such as Lee, 2012;

Panayiotou et al., 2019; Platz, 2021; Xu & Qi, 2019) in support of stronger student–teacher connections.

Sabol and Pianta (2012) suggested that student relationships with a caring adult (not necessarily the parent) may be “the single most important element in protecting young people who have multiple risks in their lives” (p. 213). Growing literature also appears to support the development of socio-emotional as well as academic learning outcomes, as a way of promoting wellbeing, resilience and success within educational frameworks (Barry et al., 2017; Brown, 2019; Harvey-Flowers, 2022; Murray et al., 2006). If the findings of these authors are to be accepted, then teachers developing significant student–teacher relationships within their professional practice seems vital.

Despite clear links between caring teacher relationships and student wellbeing, the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s latest Strategic Intentions (at the time of this thesis) have been directed towards improving attendance, educational achievement and system stewardship (Ministry of Education, 2024). While single references to social and emotional wellbeing and the value of relationships to improve student learning do exist within the latest draft curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2025), they do not specifically prioritise student–teacher relationships (caring or otherwise) and they are missing from current ministerial priorities. The previous government’s ‘statement of national education and learning priorities (NELP)’ (Ministry of Education, 2020) which expired at the end of 2025, was similarly devoid of learning objectives or priority areas which supported the development of socio-emotional outcomes for students. A divide has become apparent between the educational and social needs of the students and the planned response of the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

The role and wellbeing of teachers who create significant connections with their students was also highlighted as an important consideration within the literature (Higgins & Goodall, 2021; Humphries, 2025; Post Primary Teachers’ Association, 2024). Much of the commonly accepted body of knowledge in the area of teacher–student relationships established clear links between positive student–teacher connections and improved academic achievement (Comer, 1984; Frydenberg et al., 2017; Hattie, 2003; Panayiotou et al., 2019; Platz, 2021). While the value of student outcomes from positive teaching relationships appeared well researched, teacher experiences within such STRs did not appear to draw the same level of attention. This study presented an opportunity to also consider such teacher experiences.

1.2.3 The Place of Caring in New Zealand Schools

As a South Pacific country placed at some distance from its nearest neighbours, New Zealand has experienced a unique cultural identity and isolation. Influences on this culture are many and varied and alongside the dominant European (colonial) system, New Zealand schools include the language and world views of indigenous Māori students, Pacific Island people and a wide range of influences from other nationalities. Together these cultural influences have contributed towards a distinctive Aotearoa New Zealand cultural landscape.

New Zealand is considered a bicultural nation underwritten by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (a treaty of partnership between the Māori people and the British crown, signed in 1840). As such, New Zealand education (as in other areas of government) has worked towards the goal of partnership between European and Māori cultures, seeking to value equally the differing world views. As a culturally diverse nation, educational practices within New Zealand are now designed to be inclusive of other nationalities represented within the population.

Conducting this study within a New Zealand educational context, its findings related directly to participants influenced by the unique social and cultural landscape of this country. Reynolds (2021) and Webber (2024) considered this landscape to be one historically dominated by Western world views and social constructs. As such, New Zealand students and teachers have been influenced by an educational system built upon educational disparity, despite significant work being done to remediate inequalities in the last 30 years (Bishop, 2019; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Glynn, 2015; Macfarlane, 1997; Webber, 2024). Participant responses were therefore explored within this context, encouraging broader ‘ways of knowing’ to be included in the construction of knowledge.

New Zealand’s largest longitudinal study of young people and their families called ‘Growing Up in New Zealand’ (University of Auckland, 2026), followed the lives of over 6000 children from before birth until early adulthood. Part of their study discussed the significance of school engagement for young adolescents and recommended the prioritisation of initiatives to improve student–teacher relationships. These authors suggested that for students in New Zealand, “strong student–teacher relationships, measured by factors such as respect, support, and belief in the student's potential, are significantly linked to school engagement” (Tait et al., 2023, p. 12). While the Growing Up in New Zealand study provided evidence of student need (valuable in its own right), it also supported outcomes associated with the government’s most recent child wellbeing strategy (Ministry of Social

Development, 2024), specifically outcomes Four, Five and Six, related to learning and development, connection and empowerment. It is hoped that this study will offer educators clearer understandings of both the processes of STRs and their potential to improve outcomes for all students. In doing so, student–teacher equity and partnership within educational contexts stands to be improved.

New Zealand’s current damning mental health and wellbeing statistics for young people are considered to be significant and concerning for social agencies (UNICEF Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). Fleming et al. (2020) suggests that nearly a quarter of young people will experience clinically significant symptoms of depression whilst attending New Zealand secondary schools, with New Zealand now being ranked last place (of 36 OECD countries) in terms of overall child mental health (UNICEF, 2025). Alongside growing awareness of global pandemic (COVID-19) impacts, where approximately 1.6 billion young people were temporarily out of school (Cortese et al., 2020), concerns have escalated globally regarding student wellbeing. Supporting such concerns are the World Health Organization (2020) who name suicide as the third leading cause of death amongst older adolescents globally. The needs of young people in the care of educators have arguably never been higher.

1.3 The Use of Interpretative Phenomenology to Study STRs

Individuals make sense of the world through a lens of their own experience and according to Ryan (2018), no single reality exists. The subjective nature of how participants in this study had experienced their relationships aligned well within the interpretative philosophical lens which allows for multiple possible realities to occur simultaneously. Student–teacher relationships were considered to be an observable phenomenon (Krauss, 2005) where rich and detailed descriptions of lived experiences were able to be gathered and where the meaning of these experiences were considered important. For this reason, the theoretical position of interpretative phenomenology (IP) (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Tuohy et al., 2013; van Manen, 2017) was chosen to underpin the study, with the associated interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Love et al., 2020; Smith & Osborn, 2021) selected as its methodological framework.

1.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenology and the Use of Metaphor

Encouraging rich and nuanced descriptions of participant lived experience is an essential element of IPA and the use of metaphor has long been recognised as a mechanism to assist in these descriptions. Steele et al. (2022) believed that their use in research not only helped complex notions be more readily understood but also allowed the researcher to “tap the imagination and emotions of an audience” (p. 100). According to Shinebourne and Smith (2010), metaphors can be considered powerful “tools for communicating and sharing experience previously unexpressed or unexplored” (p. 59).

The metaphor of ‘space’ is used throughout this research to help describe social, emotional and relational connections between students and teachers. Sato et al. (2025) employed this metaphor in their analysis of partnership principles, suggesting space exists as a place “in which this partnership work is located” (p. 7). The Samoan and Tongan construct of ‘vā’ also supports this understanding of space and while alternative meanings also exist across other Pacific Island nations, this definition describes vā as a space which connects rather than separates people within relationships (Lilomaiaava-Doktor, 2004; Tēvita, 2005; Wendt, 1999). This research’s focus on the significant connections developed between students and teachers aligns well to such constructs of relational space. According to Steele et al. (2022) use of such metaphor within research encourages “new meanings” (p. 99) to be drawn from findings and supports the interpretative phenomenological approach used in this study.

Alongside descriptions of relational space, the terms ‘nature and landscape’ have also been used to describe the attributes or core qualities by which the relationship might be recognised. While the word ‘nature’ is commonly used to describe essential behaviours and characteristics being studied, the term ‘landscape’ (when associated to descriptions of relationships), perhaps requires further clarification.

For the purposes of this study, the term landscape refers to the aspects of the relationship which were observable or that contributed to its functioning. By considering the relational landscape of those features represented within significant student–teacher connections, the researcher was offered “a glimpse into” (Dixon et al., 2023, p. 30) participant lived experiences. Basyouni and Parkinson (2022) referenced the notion of a “social landscape” (p. 204) in a similar way, with Lavrenova (2019) suggesting that her metaphorical use of the term ‘cultural landscapes’ resulted in

the “transferring of untranslatable information” (p. 161). Given that this study used an interpretative phenomenological framework, where subjective and in-depth descriptions of participant experience were sought, the term ‘landscape’ encouraged a descriptive way of considering participant experience. For this reason, its inclusion in the research question and exploration of the phenomena, was considered valuable.

1.4 Research Overview

A growing body of literature (Acquah et al., 2021; Borraccino et al., 2020; García-Moya, 2020; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Maslow, 1973; Mental Health America, 2021) revealed that all people, especially the young, needed to experience relationships that promoted safety, trust, belonging and connectedness to other humans, in order to develop and reach their potential. Improved socio-emotional outcomes appear to be needed now more than ever within educational contexts, with concerning adolescent mental health statistics attesting to this, both worldwide and within New Zealand (Benton et al., 2021; Fleming et al., 2020; Sutcliffe et al., 2023).

This study has moved some way towards bridging the gap in current educational thinking, describing the significance of student–teacher relationships and the contribution they make to student self-beliefs. Through a process of phenomenological interpretation, rich descriptions from six Year 13 students and four teachers have been explored and their lived experiences now contribute to the current body of knowledge. The characteristics of STRs for these participants have been identified and their influence on both students’ self-belief and teachers’ experience of their role, have been critically considered. This study shone a light on those things that students said mattered most to them when forming significant and influential teacher connections. It also provided students a platform from which to describe how their notions of self have developed and changed throughout the STR experience.

1.4.1 Research Question

What are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?

This research question has been designed to explore the phenomena of the STR. Using interpretative phenomenology, rich and nuanced descriptions of participant lived experiences have

been built and the process of meaning making explored. The supporting questions that follow provide a framework for the building of such understandings.

1.4.2 *Supporting Questions*

- i. What critical characteristics do students use to describe the nature and landscape of significant student–teacher relationships (STRs)?
- ii. How do these characteristics contribute towards an ethic of care between students and teachers?
- iii. What influence does the student–teacher relationship have on a student’s experience of themselves, i.e. their self-value, self-belief and wellbeing?
- iv. How do significant student–teacher relationships influence teacher experiences of their role and how are these reconciled within their practice?

1.4.3 *Contribution to New Educational Knowledge*

This research offered a unique contribution to current educational knowledge in five ways. Firstly it highlighted the importance of the STR in the development of positive student self-beliefs and social and emotional growth. In doing so, support was lent to the contention made by Ings (2017) and Nyström et al. (2018) that schools should prioritise such socio-emotional growth outcomes with more intentionality. Secondly, the notion that STRs hold value only for students considered to be at risk in some way (such as through social disadvantage, ethnicity, lower academic or socio-emotional skills) has been challenged. Data presented by students in this study provided evidence that value from STRs can be experienced by a diverse group of students, including those who already considered themselves to be academically and socially successful. Thirdly, this study has highlighted the need for STR at a time in education when student mental health and wellbeing statistics are of increasing concern and where growing disparity “among all demographic groups” (Sutcliffe et al., 2023, p. 264) has been shown to exist. Such student concerns also underline the importance of monitoring teacher workload and the need for improved practices of teacher wellbeing (Kecskemeti & Winslade, 2016) to be prioritised within educational leadership. This data may provide schools a way forward when seeking to better provide for students and staff in their care. A fourth contribution to new knowledge occurred through the study’s use of student voice to interpret definitions of STRs. According to the literature I have sourced, such definitions are often provided for participants by the researcher. Using students to select teacher participants based on student

experiences of STRs is rare. Finally, this study has used participants from the lower South Island of New Zealand. Data from such regional areas of New Zealand (serving rural communities) is seldom collected (Noonan et al., 2024) and so offered a glimpse into student–teacher experiences not commonly available. As such, this study offers the potential for findings to be applied to wider contexts (Pearce & Wood, 2019; Skerrett et al., 2021).

1.4.4 Thesis Overview

This thesis is made up of seven chapters. In this chapter I have introduced the notion of the STR and my own motivation in completing this research. The phenomenological theoretical framework which underpins this study has been introduced along with its use of metaphor to aid deep and nuanced descriptions of participant lived experience. The value of the STR within education internationally has been discussed as well as its place within a New Zealand educational framework. The growing mental health concerns associated with this time in education have also been raised and finally, I have presented my research questions and the contributions that findings make to new knowledge.

Chapter Two presents a literature review of those national and international authors who have researched the way that student–teacher relationships have been understood to date. The history of care in education is considered alongside current interpretations of school success. Student socio-emotional learning is discussed alongside the influence that teacher connections can have on such processes. The significance of the New Zealand cultural landscape and the work done by New Zealand researchers is also considered.

Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework used to underpin my own philosophical position as researcher and helps explain the research decisions made throughout the study. This chapter makes the argument for the use of a qualitative research paradigm and an interpretive phenomenological (IP) approach to the research question being asked. The ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) and the contribution it makes to the research question is also explored in more depth.

Chapter Four explains the interpretative phenomenal analysis (IPA) methodology used to gather the data along with details around how the data has been managed and processed to create and construct themes. Methodological limitations and ethical considerations are also discussed in this chapter, alongside notions of trustworthiness and the reliability of the methodology chosen.

Chapter Five outlines the research findings regarding the lived experiences of participants in STRs. Associated themes and sub-themes are described and participant data is used to help support the identified themes. Findings are presented in a way which offers descriptions of student–teacher relational phenomena, along with the influence that these connections have had to the lived experiences of participants.

Chapter Six discusses the findings from the previous chapter and looks to interpret these in the light of relevant national and international literature. The locus between previous research and the experiences of participants in this study is developed. This chapter also presents The Space Within model. This model has been developed from these research findings and is offered as one possible explanation of how student self-belief processes may be influenced within a significant teacher relationship. Stages of the model are presented and examples are drawn from participant data.

The final chapter (Chapter Seven) reflects upon the research methodology, before responding to the research question and sub-questions. The contribution to new knowledge made by the study is then considered, alongside the implications and recommendations for further research. The limitations of the study and its findings are then discussed. The thesis is concluded with a summary and final comments.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Focussing on the research question outlined during the last chapter (what are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships (STRs) and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?), this chapter reviews a range of literature related to the phenomena of STR development. In keeping with this study’s theoretical perspectives of interpretative phenomenology (IP), literature has been selected which contributes to the description and meaning of student–teacher relationships over time (Creely et al., 2021). Given that IP endeavours to construct “themes and patterns [that] are subjected to ‘cycles of understanding, interpretation and critique’” (Lindsay, 2006, p. 39), this review offers readers an understanding of the contributions made to contemporary relational thinking within school contexts, allowing findings to be compared, challenged or supported (van Manen, 2017).

In order to increase this study’s depth and academic rigour, this review draws from a range of educational and developmental perspectives and contexts, focussing on sources relating to students aged 11–18 years and the teachers who teach them. New Zealand/Pasifika and international contexts are also considered.

2.1.1 *Structure of the Literature Review*

This literature review is structured to include nine sections. It begins by considering the history of relational care in education during the 20th century, before focussing on the influences to modern pedagogical thinking within the last 30 years. Second, current interpretations of success within New Zealand secondary education are considered along with their capacity to meet the needs of today’s students. The third section discusses links between STRs and student wellbeing, highlighting the role of adolescent social development programmes in schools, along with the importance of teacher connection and the influence of student interpretation of experience. A central tenet of this study surrounds the influence of STRs on the formation of student self-beliefs. The role of self-talk in the formation of these beliefs and the possible influence of the STR in this process is also explored in this section. Section Four synthesises the associations between STRs and the wider school culture. Section Five discusses student–teacher boundaries within the context of the STR, including the possibility that psychoanalytical notions of ‘transference’ may exert an influence within the student–teacher connection.

As this research takes place in Aotearoa New Zealand, the sixth section scopes the unique landscape of student–teacher connections within the context of New Zealand and te ao Māori¹ world views. The potential for these cultural understandings of relational connections to also hold true for students of other cultural backgrounds or contexts is also examined. The role of metaphors within the te ao Māori world view and their value within this study is then considered. Section Seven explores the role of school leadership in supporting STRs, including an argument for why this time in education holds particular significance. This is followed by Section Eight, which offers the ‘care-centric’ teaching approach as the nexus of STRs. A summary of the most significant literature influencing this study concludes the chapter.

Lilomaiaava-Doktor (2004) describes the significance of making a journey or ‘malaga’ within Samoan society, where travel is considered to be circular and value is placed not only on reaching the destination but equally in the process of travelling back and forth. In keeping with such a notion, the first section of this review travels back to consider the history of student–teacher relationships in secondary education.

2.2 Looking Back: The History of Student–Teacher Relationships in Education

This section introduces some of the formational thinking behind notions of relationships within educational contexts. Offering a broad overview of international and New Zealand research, it begins by considering leading historical influences on these discussions.

2.2.1 *Origins of Relational Thinking in Schools During the 20th Century*

The landscapes of student–teacher relationships have changed dramatically over the course of the last century, with significant transformation in thinking taking place in the last 80 years in particular (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2017; Volansky, 2023). A number of theorists over this time could be considered seminal due to their influence both at the time and in the years that followed. Dewey

¹ **Te ao Māori.** This term refers to a Māori world views or holistic ways of seeing things that are culturally embedded in such things as language, traditions and spiritual beliefs and are specific to the indigenous people of New Zealand.

(1938) was one such author, conceiving that education was less individualistic than it was a fundamentally social process and he asserted that educationalists should use their relational knowledge to build the best possible learning environments. Sharing views concerning the importance of activity and experience in the process of learning, Vygotsky (1986) believed that cognitive functions were highly influenced by external factors such as social and cultural interaction and that children continue to learn through close relationships with others. This focus on external factors was in contrast to the later work of Maslow (1943) who instead concentrated on the internal elements influencing human motivation and personal growth. According to Maslow, humans required a number of lower-level or fundamental life needs to be satisfied before they could experience their full potential – a state he described as ‘self-actualisation’. Maslow’s work was fundamental to educational notions that students needed to have basic physiological and safety needs met before they could successfully access learning. He also suggested that teachers forming early and poorly informed beliefs about students, would prevent processes of student self-actualisation, as their earlier and more fundamental needs would have failed to have been met. Maslow’s belief that all people needed love and acceptance before they could reach higher level functioning meant that teachers were well placed to provide these things for students according to Burleson and Thoron (2014). The influential nature of Maslow’s work in the years that followed meant that many researchers and authors (Boston-Leary et al., 2024; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; Trivedi & Mehta, 2019) have expanded on his theory, including the recent work of Rojas et al. (2023) who argued against Maslow’s requirement for the sequential satisfaction of hierarchies.

In the years that followed World War II, school completion was identified as being more closely linked to labour trends (Shanahan et al., 1998) and the importance of academic success for all was cemented (Kantor & Tyack, 1982; Lazerson, 1971). Along with the growing influence of higher university education, school completion or graduation through academic standardised testing grew as a primary way to measure school success. At the same time, authors such as Glasser (1965) and Rogers (1969) were urging a re-thinking of relationships between students and teachers. Glasser rejected the influence of teacher rewards and punishments as motivating factors in the classroom, instead considering student behaviour as being driven by a desire to meet five non-sequential basic needs. Also focusing on students as being central to their learning, Carl Rogers’ development of ‘Person-Centred Education’ (Rogers, 1969) sought to encourage teachers to treat students with unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) and develop relationships which improved connection. His relational approach to teaching became widely influential in Western educational systems,

highlighting the intrinsic value of the student role in learning relationships. The power of significant adult relationships in the lives of developing children also formed the basis of the later work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in their development of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969). Based on this theory, Kerns et al. (2015) conducted a study on children aged 10–14 years, investigating the influence of both mother and father figures. Their findings concluded that both roles also remained important as attachment figures during later childhood, especially in terms of children's school adjustment and self-management.

Relational principles such as those described by Ainsworth (1979), Bowlby (1988) and Kerns et al. (2015) drew support from ethicist and moral philosopher Nel Noddings, whose prolific work spanned many decades, during which time she defined her notions regarding an 'ethic of care' within the student–teacher relationship (Noddings, 1984, 2002a, 2013, 2018). Noddings drew attention to the importance of reciprocity (alongside other attributes such as engrossment [later called attention] and motivational displacement) in the teacher–student relationship. In her construct of reciprocity, a teaching relationship was considered to be reciprocal and dependent on the student accepting or otherwise the care offered by their teacher (Noddings, 2012). The later work of Ferguson (2018) on student-mentor relationships in the Northeastern United States also leant on Noddings' notions of reciprocity. Ferguson found that reciprocity represented an essential element in students' development of social capital through the student–mentor relationship and that such expressions of care needed to be maintained.

Noddings had earlier argued that the curriculum itself should be structured around 'themes of care' and that the "primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring" (Noddings, 1984, p. 172). Her assertion meant that the relationship between the teacher and the student could no longer be considered of lesser importance than the content being delivered. The work of Noddings, particularly the quintessential role of care within student–teacher connections, offers a central theoretical underpinning to this study and is considered in more depth in the Chapter Three.

With relationally oriented approaches towards education growing towards the end of the 20th century, the way was open for schools to reconsider the role of student–teacher relationships in modern school environments.

2.2.2 Relational Thinking in Schools: The Last 30 Years

Since the turn of the 21st century, adolescent development continued to draw interest from academic writers. Snyder et al. (2010) considered the impact of school-based socio-emotional programmes in elementary settings, with results indicating that educational learning which focus on behaviour and character “can positively influence school-level achievement” (p. 27). This movement away from identifying problematic outcomes and towards predictors of success was supported in the work of Steinmayr et al. (2018) who found strong links between grade point average and subjective wellbeing in 8th and 9th grade high school students. A synthesis of literature concerning adolescent identity was conducted by Verhoeven et al. (2018) and suggested that learning experiences needed to be situated in supportive classroom environments. They also suggested that schools and teachers were often unaware of how they impacted overall adolescent development.

The importance of positive student–teacher relationships as a vehicle for educational success grew in acceptance, even if the measurement of this success commonly related to students’ academic and behavioural outcomes. Contributing significantly to research into relational thinking at this time, Deborah Meier campaigned against standardised testing, arguing that it was not an accurate way to measure learning outcomes (Meier, 2002). As a teacher, Principal, writer and founder of the modern ‘small schools movement’, she also suggested that large school systems prevented the types of intimate relationships necessary for teachers to know their students well enough to teach to their interests, or for students to really know their teachers. Meier proposed that we may be “the only civilization in history that organizes its youth so that the nearer they get to being adults the less and less likely they are to know any adults” (Meier, 2002, p. 13).

Researcher attention (Guidry, 2021; Sandwick et al., 2019; Thapa et al., 2013) also began to focus on the tenets of healthy or positive student–teacher relationships. Contributing characteristics of successful student–teacher connections were highlighted, along with the benefits observed from successful student–teacher connections including “promoting skills, assets, and psychological well-being” (Tolan et al., 2016, p. 214). In accordance with these notions, Riley (2010) suggested that the nature of the student–teacher relationship could sometimes resemble the parenting role. In the light of the earlier attachment work of Bowlby (1978) and Ainsworth (1979), such comparisons seemed plausible and attachment theory was widely accepted as a psychological model describing the need for close relationship with at least one primary caregiver. Attachment theory also provided a useful platform from which to draw student–teacher relational understanding and offered a description of

possible emotional attachments experienced between teacher and student (Rose et al., 2019). Attachment theory concepts such as 'secure base' and 'safe haven' were considered by Kim et al. (2018) to be resultant from appropriately attentive parenting styles that some authors believed connected parenting to the teaching relationship once students are at school. Mota and Matos (2014) argued that significant adult relationships such as those provided by the teacher, reinforced student social and emotional development and improved wellbeing and resiliency. At these times "the teacher is often seen as an extension and/or improvement of parental relationships" (Mota & Matos, 2014, p. 212). A later meta-analysis of 297 studies conducted by Endedijk et al. (2021) also established links between student-teacher and student-peer relationships. Their study suggested that relational qualities between student and teacher such as closeness and conflict, are associated with a student's socio-emotional and peer relational development.

Other studies conducted by Osterman (2000) and Cornelius-White (2007) pulled together threads of thinking regarding the need for belonging in schools and the efficacy of student-centred teacher relationships. This work amalgamated common thinking throughout the literature at that time, including the notion that 'learner-centred' student-teacher relationships demonstrated "above-average associations with positive student outcomes" (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 134). A further study by Roorda et al. (2011) considered the affective nature of student-teacher connections on student engagement and achievement and found this correlation to be substantial. Their study showed that in contrast with some assumptions within the literature, the significance of this relationship "remained important, or [was] even *more* influential, for older students, even into late adolescence" (p. 520).

During this period, researchers in New Zealand also contributed to global understanding of effective student learning approaches (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2009). Significant contributions regarding the value of the student-teacher relationship (particularly those relating to historical academic gaps between Māori and non-Māori students) were made by a small pool of researchers (such as Berryman et al., 2017; Bishop et al., 2014; Glynn, 2015; Macfarlane et al., 2014). These authors are widely cited in the literature, establishing the importance of relational connections between students and teachers within New Zealand educational settings. While valid critique of their work has also taken place, the degree in which they have been cited and used within educational settings, particularly for Māori students (in New Zealand), maintains them as prominent voices in the field.

Other authors such as O'Toole et al. (2019), drew on the work of the New Zealand Education Review Office (2016) who reviewed the extent to which New Zealand schools were responding to student wellbeing needs. Together with Macfarlane et al. (2017) and Boyd (2017), they called on educators to “address child and youth, social-emotional wellbeing issues within the school contexts of Aotearoa New Zealand” (O'Toole et al., 2019, p. 91). While consideration was given to the social disadvantage these and other students seemed to face, programmes at that time appeared to direct attention primarily towards an end to academic disparity between Māori and non-Māori students, for example ‘Te Kotahitanga’² (Bishop et al., 2009) and ‘Ka Hikitia’³ – Accelerating Success’ (Ministry of Education, 2013). Despite the introduction of these programmes, outcomes appeared to largely concede the difficulty in separating academic success from social and emotional wellbeing, and the intrinsic link this had to student–teacher relationships.

With growing national and international recognition of the benefits for stronger student–teacher relationships and more emphasis on successful student outcomes, it seems useful to examine how success has been determined within New Zealand secondary schools and whether these interpretations are still meeting the needs of all students.

2.3 Interpretations of Success Within Schools: The Focus on Academic Achievement

Interpretations of success within educational contexts often take their lead from academic completion and employment measures, however, Nyström et al. (2018) suggests that doing so “offers limited insight into the complexities of student success” (p. 466). While some cautionary links may exist between future wealth and academic success in some subject areas (Watts, 2020), many authors (Ings, 2017; Macfarlane et al., 2017; Noddings, 2018) call for educational success paradigms to better reflect the varying needs of students, both within school and in wider contexts. Nonetheless, according to Ings (2017), measures of success within secondary school systems are narrow with priority placed on academic knowledge (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007). School and

² Kotahitanga. This refers to the Māori notion of solidarity or unity, especially when a group is working towards a common goal.

³ Ka Hikitia. Meaning to step up or to lift your step in order to lengthen your stride (Ministry of Education, 2013).

community celebration awards, tertiary entry and scholarships are often reliant upon what Appleton et al. (2006) describes as “an overemphasis in school practice on indicators of academic and behavioural engagement” (p. 431).

In 2023, Dominic Randolph, the outgoing Principal of a highly successful private school in New York, cautioned against a perceived over-reliance on academic measures of success within some schools. Coining the phrases ‘fragile thoroughbred’ and ‘worshipping at the altar of A’ (Relay Graduate School of Education, n.d.), Randolph suggested that students within such academically driven schools could suffer from an inability to experience imperfection or manage failure and were just as much in need of socio-emotional intelligence as other students. Poliner and Benson (2017) referenced similar student environments of “continuous and extreme expectations of success” (p. 26). In line with such thinking, Berryman and Eley (2019) argued that New Zealand students also experience a high degree of emphasis on such academic achievement. Within New Zealand, standardised literacy and numeracy qualifications must be achieved for example, if students are to gain access to university under the age of 20, or receive the New Zealand Certificate in Educational Achievement (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2025).

Haman (2021) reports that students with trauma backgrounds find navigating school and experiencing successful outcomes more difficult than most to manage. Many students now enter schools with emotional preconditions that act as barriers to them achieving success via mainstream academic avenues. Schools who fail to recognise their students’ pre-existing needs may be poorly placed to respond to them. Overstreet and Chafouleas (2016) analysed literature surrounding trauma-informed approaches to education in the United States. They maintain that issues such as funding, staffing and the capacity of schools to follow up on identified student concerns all present as obstacles to the detection of trauma in students. Young people in these positions inevitably require safer, more trusting and transparent relational experiences (Chafouleas et al., 2015).

The significance of developing trust between students and teachers looking to establish STRs has been well supported in the literature (Bishop, 2019; Demerath et al., 2022; Noddings, 2018; von Frank, 2010). Further strengthening this construct is a recent study conducted by Chew and Cerbin (2021) identifying “student fear and mistrust” (p. 22) as one of the nine cognitive challenges that teachers needed to overcome to avoid undermining student learning. They recommend teacher attention to fairness, approachability and teacher belief in the student as significant factors to improve student learning. The importance of teacher belief in the ability of their students was also

supported in the work of Platz (2021) who considered the influence of student–teacher trust in academic attainment. Platz argued that trust between student and teacher “is crucially dependent on the relationship that connects them” (p. 690) and that this relationship must be sufficiently personal.

With the link between student–teacher relationships and positive academic outcomes clearly developed in the literature, the similarly well supported connection between positive teacher connections and measures of student wellbeing (García-Moya, 2020) is considered next.

2.4 Links Between STRs and Student Wellbeing

The link between student academic success and socio-emotional wellbeing is now widely accepted (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Gill et al., 2021; O'Farrell, 2019; Poliner & Benson, 2017; Van De Sande et al., 2022) and in response to this, socio-emotional development programmes have been developed within some schools.

2.4.1 *The Influence of Social Development Programmes on Student Wellbeing*

Over the last three decades, a growing number of social educational approaches have been developed to improve wellbeing and developmental outcomes for young people in schools. Tolan et al. (2016) describes ‘Positive Youth Development’ and ‘Social Emotional Learning’ (SEL) as two such approaches which have more theoretical overlap than other constructs. The connection between SEL and the improvement in student wellbeing seems well established in the literature and so constructs in keeping with their teaching practices have been familiar inclusions to New Zealand youth interventions to date (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2018; Education Review Office, 2016; Macfarlane et al., 2017). Many researchers suggest that the development of positive student–teacher relationships are essential in creating socially and emotionally competent students (Eells, 2017; Endedijk et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2019; Seligman, 2011). The skills students acquire as part of these relationships are also said to contribute significantly towards improvements to their identity, resilience and cultural competence (Olsson et al., 2012; Poliner & Benson, 2017; TED, 2015).

Schonert-Reichl et al. (2017) describe SEL as a process of attaining skills to understand and manage emotion, with such skills helping students to express empathy, maintain relationships and make responsible decisions. While SEL is sometimes referenced alongside other terms such as ‘21st

century', 'non- cognitive' or 'soft skills', authors including Farrington et al. (2012) and Poliner and Benson (2017) suggest that everything involving learning involves cognition, so the use of non-cognitive skills is misleading. Poliner and Benson (2017) go on to advise "there is very little 'soft' about being a competent learner, advocate, ally or leader" (p. 8), so respectfully, I have tried to avoid the terms 'non-cognitive' or 'soft skills' within this thesis as well. According to Jones and Doolittle (2017), the use of SEL terminology by policy makers and parents alike has grown, a trend perhaps related to its capacity to be "learned and nurtured" (p. 5). This promotion of SEL concepts is further endorsed by authors such as Brown (2019) who suggest that "adolescents' mental health, social skills, and academic achievement, all depend on SEL" (para. 3).

The success of programmes designed to improve social and emotional skills in schools appear to attribute their success, at least in part, to the existence of STRs (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017), which in turn, appear to be reliant upon high levels of student–teacher connection (Chen & Shih, 2025; Clark, 2018; Noddings, 2013). New Zealand educational models such as the 'Te Whare Tapa Whā' (Durie, 1984), 'Ka Hikitia: Managing for Success' (Ministry of Education, 2009) and 'Ka Hikitia: Accelerating Success' (Ministry of Education, 2013) share Māori thought processes according to Macfarlane et al. (2017). SEL competencies are also closely aligned to some of the key capabilities of the New Zealand curriculum for example 'relating to others' and 'managing self' (Ministry of Education, 2025). As a result, O'Toole et al. (2019) suggests that the "time is right and appropriate to consider combining SEL and Māori cultural approaches in a pilot intervention study" (p. 99).

2.4.2 The Importance of Teacher Connection Within STRs

Wellbeing is now increasingly associated with the ability to connect relationally. The Harvard study of adult development (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023) is one such research programme which began in 1938 and looked to uncover the behavioural and psychosocial variables that might impact health and wellbeing at the end of life. Director of this study (at the time of this research), Robert Waldinger, insists "the clearest message that we get from this 75-year study is this: good relationships keep us happier and healthier – period" (Waldinger, 2023, para. 4). Such findings are strengthened by the work of Felten and Lambert (2020), who conducted over 400 interviews within U.S. colleges and found that it was the human connection between students and teachers which drove success in higher level studies. They implored educators to "be intentional about promoting connections" (p. xi). Schwartz (2023) adds weight to their findings in her book 'Connected Teaching: Relationship, Power and Mattering in Higher Education', arguing that "relationship, identity, and

emotion form the heart of connected teaching” (p. 1). One of the means by which such connection can be achieved is through the act of teachers recognising and acknowledging their students.

2.4.2.1 Teacher Recognition of Students.

An intentional action of teacher connection often begins in the process of noticing students. French philosopher Ricoeur (2005) developed his theory of recognition suggesting a direct connection between the experience of being recognised in a relationship and the formation of self-esteem. Similarly Lagestad et al. (2019) suggested that “the core notion is that recognition from others forms the basis for the development of human relations, identity, and self-esteem” (p. 180). This assertion is also well supported in the work of Harris and Orth (2020) whose meta-analysis of the literature revealed a strong correlation between social relationships and self-esteem. According to Flett (2018), this can be understood as the human need to ‘matter’.

As an educator of primarily international students within a U.S. university, Edwards (2021) recognised the contrasting position of ‘student invisibility’ within class. She argued that teachers not noticing their students in class challenged the development of meaningful relationships. These findings resonated with the work of Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016), whose book *Better Classroom Relationships*, described the importance of students being both recognised and validated by their teachers as a way of supporting relationship-centred classrooms. As academic researchers and authors with broad backgrounds in education and counselling, Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016) consider direct student–teacher dialogue to offer one way of communicating such validation.

2.4.2.2 Student–Teacher Dialogue.

Alongside the importance of students being noticed by their teachers, the process of teachers engaging students in meaningful dialogue also represents a powerful mechanism by which connection occurs. The power of teacher dialogue has been widely acknowledged across fields such as medicine and rehabilitation (Stewart & Loftus, 2018), sports performance (Sahli et al., 2020) and also within social and political circles (Koschut, 2017). Within New Zealand education, authors such as Bishop (2019) were clear that personalised conversations that drew upon student’s prior knowledge and experience demonstrated that they were valued as individuals and strengthened student–teacher relationships. In this way, language can act to “lift students to their highest

potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust” (Denton, 2008, p. 28).

Together with the value of verbal communication, Bambaeroo and Shokrpour (2017) also argued that the power of non-verbal communication had a meaningful place in significant relationship development. In a study which reviewed literature regarding teacher communication and classroom success, Bambaeroo and Shokrpour (2017) found non-verbal communication to be “highly reliable in the communication process” (p. 51). These findings also resonated with the work of Strachan (2015), who found background music to have a positive effect on student focus. Adding strength to their assertion, an article written by Wilson (2022) stressed the importance of the space between musical notes and the difficulty of not jumping “into that moment of bare space” (para. 6) in the belief that it was without purpose.

2.4.2.3 The Allocation and Importance of Teacher Time and Temperament.

The importance of teachers allocating time to students with whom they are developing significant connections has also been well supported. Kezar and Maxey (2014, Fall) looked at first-year university students in the U.S. and the influence of teacher time allocation on their success. They found that “when students feel respected by their instructors or when faculty members make time for them and demonstrate care through personal attention or quick response to e-mail, students benefit” (p. 36). Such findings were also supported in the earlier work of Rudolfsson et al. (2007) in their study of patients feeling cared for by nurses.

Alongside teachers dedicating time within significant relationships, the notion that teachers connect with students in a way which is warm, welcoming and unrushed is essential according to Edlund et al. (2013) who considered the contextual determinations of the concept of dignity. Other authors such as Noddings (2015) and Makri-Botsari (2015) similarly supported the value of teacher connection, with Makri-Botsari (2015) suggesting “the more conditional the acceptance one experiences, the lower one's level of perceived acceptance” (p. 58). Such findings were also consistent with the earlier work of Roth et al. (2009) who found unconditional positive regard and supporting adolescent autonomy, improved their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

One important marker of teacher disposition can occur through the use of teacher–student humour (Abraham et al., 2014). In readings surrounding the use of humour, the words humour,

humility and humanity are all considered to come from the same base word, 'humus', meaning 'of the earth' (Chappell, 2020). In this context, it is possible to understand how the use of humour from teachers may remind students that they share similarities with each other that reach beyond those differences constructed by their dissimilar groups or identities. According to Mara (2022), by being able to laugh at the same things, collective belonging to the rest of humanity is reinforced. Humour reminds individuals that they share human needs and failings and as such, endorses a deeper sense of humility and "confirm[s] each other's sense of belonging" (Besnier, 2016, p. 90). The notion that we belong to this wider group, according to Rosenblatt (2017), "derives from the experience of being valued" (p. 97) and when applied to the student–teacher role, assures students of safety and acceptance and promotes student teacher connection.

2.4.2.4 The Significance of Teacher Connections to Student Wellbeing.

According to Emerson (1884), a 19th century poet and philosopher, the connections that humans desire the most are those that encourage them to be the best version of themselves. Highly influential student–teacher connections (as explored in this study) may serve a similar purpose in the promotion of adolescent wellbeing and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Jose et al., 2012; Resnick et al., 1997; Walker & Avant, 2019). Such authors commonly reference notions of autonomy, belonging, optimism, relatedness or competency, as being important in the meeting of human needs. However the need for connection has been explained within the literature, agreement exists that it represents one of our most basic human requirements and "is rooted deep within us biologically" (Braren, 2024, para. 1).

Olsson et al. (2012) drew data from one of New Zealand's largest longitudinal studies, the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, and demonstrated that "the pathway between adolescent social connection and well-being over a decade later illustrates the enduring significance of positive social relationships" (p. 1079). According to Jordan (2023), isolation from social connections particularly during adolescence, reduced self-regulation, inner safety and problem-solving capabilities. Social-emotional connections made between students and teachers were therefore considered to be important, with Lujan and DiCarlo (2017) calling the meeting of these needs critical "to develop and maintain close personal relationships and have a feeling of belonging" (p. 504).

Lujan and DiCarlo (2017) further suggested that individualised student–teacher connections may satisfy some of the basic tenets of self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Luo & Derakhshan, 2024; Walkington & Ommering, 2022). SDT is a developmental theory created by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan that attempts to explain human motivation using the constructs of relatedness, competence and autonomy. According to this theory, humans have these three overarching and universal “psychological needs that must be satisfied for effective functioning and psychological health” (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 183). Despite some criticism that notions of autonomy may not be valued as strongly in some cultures as in others (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999), Deci and Ryan argued that the need to self-determine was “essential for optimal functioning in a broad range of highly varied cultures” (p. 183). Within the constructs of SDT, McHugh et al. (2012) believed that a need for adolescent relatedness could be “met through the student and teacher working together to construct a positive student–teacher relationship” (p. 13). The importance of teachers supporting student autonomy has since been reinforced through the work of Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2020) who found that teaching practices considered to be ‘autonomy supportive’ (which include offering student choice and responsibility for their own learning) promoted student wellbeing.

The experience of establishing equitable student–teacher relationships also has wider links to equity theory (Adams, 1963). This theory attempts to describe how people evaluate the fairness of interpersonal relationships and also explains the impact on people when these relationships are inequitable (Sprecher, 2016). Although equity theory drew some criticism as being too simplistic to adequately account for the complexity of human relations (including cultural and social differences), it supported the understanding that inequity promoted ‘psychological discomfort’ (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023). The link between inequity and distress was also strengthened through the work of Bowles (2016) in his study of 208 Australian secondary school students and their perceptions of equity with friends, teachers, parents and siblings. Further studies also demonstrated the importance of equity in adolescent relationship development (Vespone, 2023) and its wider impact on student belonging, school connection and wellbeing (Keyes, 2019; Poole, 2025).

Alongside notions of autonomy and equity, growing authors are insisting that in order for teacher connections to positively influence student wellbeing, they must be sufficiently personal and offer an individual student experience (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2017; McKay & Macomber, 2021; Yu et al., 2016). As a New Zealand based educational leadership trainer and professional speaker, Peachey (2020) contends that the unique and individual nature of human connection contributes to the value the

relationship experienced by those within it. Speaking at the New Zealand NASDAP (National Association of Secondary Deputy and Assistant Principals) conference held in Christchurch in 2021, he succinctly summarised this position when arguing that “wellbeing is not a something, it’s a someone” (personal communication, February 10, 2025).

The familiar focus on wellbeing within public and private sectors, has meant that conclusive agreement on a definition of wellbeing can be challenging (Khanna, 2025). McNaught (2011) described wellbeing as a “confusing, complex and contested field” (p. 7). Sharing a similar view, Soutter et al. (2011) designed a conceptual framework, offering a lens through which the notion of wellbeing could be considered. They conceived that the domains of “having, being, relating, thinking, feeling, functioning, and striving” (p. 591) were particularly relevant to young peoples’ experiences of wellbeing in secondary school contexts. The World Health Organization (2021) offered a definition related to aspects of mental health which shared many of the elements significant to this study. They interpret wellbeing in the following way:

The individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. With respect to children, an emphasis is placed on the developmental aspects, for instance, having a positive sense of identity, the ability to manage thoughts, emotions, as well as to build social relationships and the aptitude to learn and to acquire an education, ultimately enabling their full active participation in society. (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 1).

This description, while not considered broad enough by some scholars, shares important links to the development of relationships and positive self-belief structures as young people learn (Frydenberg et al., 2017; Macfarlane et al., 2017; Seth-Smith, 2006; Van De Sande et al., 2022). Irrespective of the exact description adopted, many authors (such as Carter & Andersen, 2019; Durie, 1984; Seligman, 2011) suggest that wellbeing should be considered a construct drawn from a number of areas of influence, each with the propensity to impact the other. With this in mind, any discussion of wellbeing should be holistic and look to apply a broad lens across multiple influencing factors, not least of which is the lens through which the student themselves interprets their own lived experiences.

2.4.3 *The Influence of Student Interpretation on Wellbeing*

Measures of wellbeing were considered by Gill et al. (2021) to be influenced by a variety of personal lived experiences specific to the student. Generic and social messaging for example, were seen to significantly influence a young person's interpretation of events and their resulting sense of happiness and contentment (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2021; O'Toole et al., 2019). Orkibi et al. (2018) found strong links between adolescent measures of pro-social self-control (a social development skill) and associated scores of positive emotions. Their findings suggested that student interpretations of life events, i.e. as successful or not, may well be linked to social development markers such as the ability to manage emotions, connect with others, make good decisions and so on. Park (2016) suggested that the more a young person's life was able to be lived in a way that allowed them to experience events positively, the more subjective wellbeing they may experience.

While the exact contribution a teacher's connection makes to their student's social development skills and later wellbeing may be complex, the ability for these types of relationships to influence student motivation and self-concepts is well supported (Acquah et al., 2021; Carroll, 2022; Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari, 2018; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2022). Researchers (Donohue, 2021; Kampman et al., 2022; Möller, 2024; Simpkins et al., 2015) largely agree that student self-beliefs are derived from a range of influential relationships accessed during their life. According to Johnston et al. (2021), teacher connections can represent a highly significant relationship amongst these, influencing student self-talk, as well as the formation of self-beliefs. This concept is explored next.

2.4.4 *STRs and their Influence on Student Self-Talk*

The connection between positive teaching relationships and the internal messages or self-talk students generate in response to them, is significant within the context of this study. According to Endedijk et al. (2021) the impact of teacher feedback on students, including "how teachers relate to students, may affect students' peer relationships and thereby foster or hamper students' development" (p. 1). This assertion highlights the notion that significant relationships between students and their teachers may not always be positive or healthy. Indeed Endedijk et al. (2021) suggested that it is the reduction of these negative teacher interactions and relationships that has the greater impact on student wellbeing.

Self-talk or 'inner speech' (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015) has been described as a subjective experience, particularly in childhood, where evidence exists of its central role "in regulating behavior and supporting complex cognitive functions" (p. 957). Defined as the "experience of language in the absence of overt and audible articulation" (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015, p. 931), inner speech may represent an essential element in a student's experience of change throughout the time of their significant teacher connection. These assertions gain support from authors such as Orvell and Kross (2019) and Sabzipour et al. (2023) whose studies reviewed evidence that positive self-talk promoted self-regulation. Orvell and Kross (2019) argued that practices of self-talk "helps people regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours across a range of situations" (p. 95). Strong arguments also exist that these processes of self-talk can bear similarities within groups such as adolescents (for example in their proclivity to occupy a negative bias) (Belmans et al., 2023; Brinthaupt & Morin, 2023; Mulawarman et al., 2024; Scott, 2023) .

According to Vygotsky (1986), thought development is strongly connected to language and by the social and cultural experiences of the student. He suggested that "inner speech depends on outside factors" (p. 94), one of the most significant of which can be the student-teacher relationship (Pesu et al., 2016; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Wentzel, 2022). In a study of 177 undergraduate students in the Southeastern United States, Uhrich et al. (2023) looked at the impact of both constructive and dysfunctional self-talk patterns on educational outcomes. Their findings indicated that constructive self-talk was positively associated with improved self-efficacy, satisfaction and academic performance. They considered that interventions that promoted positive self-talk in students "in the context of the school setting have the potential to be transformative" (p. 52). Similarly, Zabel et al. (2019) outlined key positive statements within student-teacher relationships, such as "I believe in you, you can succeed, you can do it, I'll be here, I'll support you along the way" (p. 200) as being highly influential of student self-belief. These critical teacher messages contributed to the development of healthy relationships between students and their teachers in their study. It also appeared likely that such messages were built on broader relational foundations such as respect, honesty and trust.

Significant teachers and the accompanying messaging they present within relationships can have powerful and long-lasting implications on student experiences and the formation of self-beliefs. Chandrasegaran and Padmakumari (2018) examined the influence of positive teacher student relationships, particularly regarding the possibility that they represented what they described as

self-fulfilling prophecies. They described the teachers' relationships as a developmental asset for the student, adding "it was found that teachers' feedback and interactions, prominently influenced students' perceptions of themselves, their mood and affect" (p. 16). The exact way in which relationships of this nature may act to promote such transformative processes appears complex, however some authors (Dow-Edwards et al., 2019; Glasper & Neigh, 2018; Vogel-Ciernia et al., 2018) suggested changes to the way in which the brain interprets the world may occur at a neurological level.

Vogel-Ciernia et al. (2018) described "experience-dependant neuroplasticity" (p. 318) as one possible explanation of how brain function could change dependant on connections and experiences made with others. While variability among studies does exist, "findings of the present systematic review provide evidence of neuroplasticity in children and adolescents" (Weyandt et al., 2020, p. 17). Young (2016) reinforced the value of such connections, suggesting "what you focus on is what becomes powerful" (para. 1).

While such student–teacher processes hold power for the individual students within the relationship, they also have the potential to transform cultures within the wider school. The influence of STRs on broader school cultures are considered next.

2.5 STRs and their Influence on School Culture

The connections between STRs and improved school climates, cultures and communities are well supported in the literature as demonstrated in an evaluation by a specialist in youth development at the University of Chicago, Professor Ming-Te Wang. Wang and Degol (2016) found that all developmental theories examined in their study stressed "the importance of developing strong social bonds between teachers and students" (p. 321). Such findings supported the earlier work of Thapa et al. (2013) who reviewed 206 school climate studies and suggested that "safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climates tended to foster a greater attachment to school and provide the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning" (p. 363). In line with these research outcomes, the New Zealand Education Review Office (2016) also maintained that "positive and trusting relationships are at the centre of effective efforts to promote student wellbeing" (p. 28).

The notion that student social and emotional needs should be prioritised alongside their academic success as a means of influencing school-wide culture is well supported within the literature (Barry et al., 2017; Comer, 2004; Macfarlane et al., 2017). U.S researcher Golubcow-Teglasi (2016) explored how prioritising student–teacher relationships within a high school context can lead to whole-school reform. The premise that students could only learn once their emotional needs were met, was considered alongside student emotional safety in the school environment and the connection this has to academic success. Belonging, relatedness and connectedness were considered “fundamental human need[s] that must be satisfied before people can learn” (p. 39). While all three of these needs appear significant in the construction of any relationship, the degree to which they were fostered within a school community may well influence wider cultures of care.

Alongside the clear student need for strong interpersonal relationships, some researchers (Milatz et al., 2015; Spilt et al., 2011) suggested that teachers also have basic psychological needs which were met through relational connection with their students. For this reason, perhaps it is not surprising that “the personal wellbeing of teachers seem affected by individual teacher–student relationships” (Spilt et al., 2011, p. 470). Administrators wishing to support teachers navigating STRs may begin by encouraging teacher boundary definition and wellbeing maintenance. The requirement for safe and professional student–teacher boundaries is considered next.

2.6 STRs and Student–Teacher Boundaries

Teachers in New Zealand are asked to work in the best interests of students by “engaging in ethical and professional relationships with learners that respect professional boundaries” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017, p. 10). Guidelines such as this are designed to keep relationships between students and teachers healthy and safe. In reference to university student–teacher relationships, Cook-Sather (2023) encouraged teachers to “regard students as knowers and [that] sharing power and responsibility for teaching scholarship can result in more informed and more inclusive understandings” (p. 200). Zabel et al. (2019) cautioned however that teachers who attempted to encourage an overly close relationship with students risked confusing the purpose of the relationship and in doing so, crossed professional boundaries of the teaching role. The importance of teachers and students exchanging “gifts but not places” (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 263) within their relationship highlights the value of good teacher professional development and supervision practices within schools, so that staff might avoid such boundary confusions. The importance of teachers having “frank discussions about these boundaries with school leadership” (Hogan & White,

2021, p. 32) was found to be crucial in the development of teacher's own professional learning and as a means of promoting student and staff wellbeing.

While the maintenance of good student–teacher boundaries were widely supported in the literature, a study conducted by Chang (2019) exploring caring relationships in teaching, found that teachers “often play many roles in supporting students” (p. 77) and that the ability for teachers to temporarily depart from their traditional teaching roles and take up alternate positions (such as parent or coach), was essential to the development of caring student–teacher relationships. The importance of teachers taking up advocacy roles, especially for students who experience social disadvantage, has also been supported in a number of studies (Bennett et al., 2021; J. F. Goodman, 2021; James, 2021; Joseph & Dinah, 2017), with such work strengthened by the previously discussed notions surrounding attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Kesner, 2000; Riley, 2010) and its connection to the role of teaching. In a study of Indonesian senior high school students Kurnianingsih et al. (2012) leant support to this contention, with their findings suggesting that trust bestowed on teachers by students was heavily influenced by that teacher's association with a parental figure.

Other teacher role departures appear in the literature which are said to support student learning and wellbeing. One of these included the notion of teachers at times adopting the role of ‘educational friend’ (Davids & Waghid, 2020; Gibran, 2015; Rawlins, 2000), a role bearing similarities to that of the ‘critical ally’ or ‘critical friend’ within the professional teaching development processes (Hardiman & Dewing, 2014; Wennergren, 2016). This role has been developed between teaching colleagues to improve awareness and teaching practice. While teachers being attuned to student needs and adopting differing roles within the student–teacher relationship has been considered beneficial (Bishop, 2019; Turner-Adams et al., 2023) and even healthy (Anderson, 2023) to students, care is required to avoid emotional projection between student and teacher during such times (Aultman et al., 2009; Hagenauer et al., 2022; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023).

2.6.1 *Transference: Unintentional and Subconscious Role-Based Projection*

One mechanism which appeared to have had little discussion within educational contexts relates to the notion of ‘transference’ (or ‘countertransference’ if directed from the teacher back towards the student). Transference has been defined as a “transfer of feelings, attitudes, thoughts, desires, fantasies, or behaviors originally experienced in the past with significant others (e.g., parents,

siblings, grandparents, or teachers), to a different person that the individual is currently in an interpersonal relationship with” (Suszek et al., 2019, p. 364). Described by Sigmund Freud at the end of the 19th century and related to psychoanalytical discussion of therapeutic relationships (Marazzi et al., 2025), the American Psychological Association suggested that broader applications of this term were also valid. They argued that the “unconscious repetition of earlier behaviors and their projection onto new subjects - is acknowledged as applying to all human interactions” (“Transference,” 2015, p. 1101). Such projections may occur more commonly within contexts where power differentials exist, such as between students and their teachers. Power imbalances (related to role differentiation between students and teachers) have led to criticisms concerning student voice accuracy in some educational contexts (Ladkin, 2017). Ladkin argued that inaccuracies from students when responding to teachers gathering data may be exacerbated by notions associated with student–teacher transference.

Some exploration of transference (in relation to the dynamic of teaching) has taken place however (Levy & Scala, 2012; Shim, 2015), with Britzman (2013) suggesting that within the process of education, there “is no learning without transference” (p. 111). In a study of participants from a major midwestern U.S. university, Slater et al. (2012) considered the influence of teacher countertransference and found that teacher responses due to countertransference were often “intense and disproportionate to the triggering situation” (p. 16). They suggested training and professional discussion amongst colleagues to reduce its impact on practice. In a later study interviewing primary and secondary teachers, Sherry et al. (2021) found that “most teachers experience countertransference and transference daily in the classroom with limited understanding of how these crucial ideas impact their relationship” (p. 137).

Aside from possible notions of transference, Hibbert and Wright (2022) suggested that students are also exposed to learning through other experiences that are not intentional or connected to any curriculum. They argued that learning also occurs through the modelling of relationships and experiences that occur throughout the school day. They called this learning the ‘hidden curriculum’ and suggested it represented “what is learnt through unstructured socialisation in the learning context” (p. 419). Such learning may include moral or values-based components presented during relational connection with teachers (Caine et al., 2020). This kind of relational modelling and ethical treatment of others may support or challenge formalised curriculum boundaries and so contribute to the wider culture of the school. In line with such thinking, some researchers in New Zealand

(Bishop et al., 2014; Macfarlane et al., 2007; Macfarlane et al., 2014; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Reynolds, 2021) argued that all learning, intentional and unintentional, shares a cultural context that needs to be understood. With this in mind, the next area for discussion seeks to determine the importance of context, specifically the very distinctive landscapes of Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools.

2.7 Aotearoa New Zealand — a Landscape of Relationships

As a bicultural nation (based on the Treaty of Waitangi signed in 1840), New Zealand STRs need also to be considered alongside the unique understandings of te ao Māori world views. Traditional knowledge frameworks such as those maintained within Māori world views have long held values and practices promoting relational connections and the importance of relational learning. Cultural practices passed down from generation to generation have historically been under-valued alongside Western notions of relationships and educational beliefs (Druker-Ibáñez & Cáceres-Jensen, 2022; Macfarlane, 2015). More recently Māori learning constructs of education and wellbeing have been recognised by researchers and educationalists and valued accordingly. The influence of a dominant discourse on the stories students accept about themselves and others is discussed in the work of Menting-Wilson (2021), who explored how teachers experienced support whilst implementing restorative justice programmes in U.S. public schools. She suggested that “those in positions of power often enforce their realities on others as truth” (p. 4).

The cultural worldview of Māori holds several key elements built on relational connection. One model informed by this Māori worldview and used widely within New Zealand educational circles is ‘Te Whare Tapa Whā’ (the four-sided house) (Durie, 1984). Taha Wairua (spiritual and self-management); Taha Hinengaro (personal empowerment and self-esteem, resilience, self-awareness and responsible decision-making); Taha Tinana (physical behaviours, safety and social awareness); and Taha Whānau (healthy relationships and growing sound relationships skills), represent the four pillars of the whare (or house) and the notions which underpin educational success (Macfarlane et al., 2017). The Te Whare Tapa Whā model brought an alignment between the development of socio-emotional relational skills and te ao Māori traditional understandings of wellbeing. In this way, the model weaves together both cultural knowledge and educational learning experiences for many young people (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Macfarlane et al. (2014) conducted a study looking at the attributes of successful Māori students in their final year of secondary school. Attributes considered important included identity (the belief in oneself), diligence (the commitment to overcome difficulties), relationships (the ability to sustain connections) and innovation (an inquiring and an exploratory mindset). Wellbeing (the physical, spiritual and mental health required to flourish), scholarship (an ability to excel in examinations), humility (serving others before self) and Māori values (specifically care, inclusion and spirituality) were also identified and found to be consistent with both the development of socio-emotional learning and te ao Māori concepts of wellbeing. Relational connection and personal wellbeing are considered key attributes to Māori student success (Macfarlane et al., 2014; McRae et al., 2010; Webber, 2024) and these constructs are explored next.

2.7.1 Integrating Māori Cultural Concepts to Improve Student Wellbeing

According to Macfarlane (2015) successful Māori students were more likely than unsuccessful Māori students to experience a sense of belonging and connectedness to their whānau⁴ and have improved social skills more broadly. Part of the ethic embedded within Whānau or Whanaungatanga⁵ is the concept of Manaakitanga⁶ (Rolleston et al., 2021). The concept of a culturally responsive pedagogy is outlined in the New Zealand teaching code of practice (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017) and is based on this culture of care (Webber, 2024). Constructs of care within Māori world views include the notion 'mana' (respect). Not simply the possession of power or authority, mana is closely related to caring and seeing value in others and as such, is strongly linked to wellbeing, especially within educational relationships. Macfarlane (2015)

⁴ Whānau. Refers to the Māori construct of family or extended family or a close

⁵ Whanaungatanga. This Māori term has a meaning which relates to the close connections or relationships developed between people who share similar experiences. Whanaungatanga may contribute to a sense of belonging within a group.

⁶ Manaakitanga. Refers to the Māori construct of caring which encompasses aspects of hospitality, kindness and respect for the needs of others.

suggested that teachers who believed in their students unconditionally awakened students to “deeper possibilities within themselves” (p. 33).

Teachers believing in their students is considered to be especially important for those students considered to be ‘at risk’ as a result of trauma, deficiency or other social disadvantage. Indeed some authors (such as Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Werner & Smith, 2001) suggested that the impact of a single caring adult in the life of a traumatised student can represent one of their most significant influences. According to Ricketts (2019), such “at-risk students stand to gain the most from positive student–teacher relationships, yet they are least likely to enjoy such relationships” (p. 58). This finding established the importance of teachers teaching with appropriate understanding and suitable consideration for possible student needs. It also supported the earlier work of Noddings (2012) who cautioned against the notion that such student needs are always apparent.

The likelihood that young people lacking whanaungatanga or a sense of belonging within the dominant cultural group may exhibit relational reluctance in the form of micro-aggressions is worthy of further consideration. This is especially so if the definition of culture is broad and represents any group with shared customs, behaviours and social understandings. Golubcow-Teglasi (2016) drew specific attention to the cultivation of hope as a necessity if students were to grow under what he suggests could be “radically inhospitable conditions” (p. 43). The endurance of hope, both on the part of the student and the teacher, seems an important precursor to wellbeing within the school environment.

Wentzel (1998) remarked that many relationship studies seemed to involve minority, inner-city or low achieving students but that her study provided evidence that “supportive and caring relationships are important for White middle-class students as well” (p. 208). Accordingly, whether Māori or tauīwi (other ethnicities), cultural educational values or frameworks of Western learning, the constructs that build and sustain relationships of significance appear valuable and applicable to all students (Skerrett, 2010). The literature highlighted a growing need for students to engage in such relationships of significance with their teachers and that such connections were supported within cultural frameworks of understanding (Bishop et al., 2014). According to Webber (2024), the focus of these relationships needed to be “unrelenting and strengths-based” (p. 7), as their outcomes seemed increasingly determinant of future wellbeing and success, especially for those at risk.

One of the strengths offered within te ao Māori contextual frameworks is the use of metaphor to help build understanding and support relational development. Macfarlane and Glynn (2024) provide an example of such metaphor use in their descriptions of an awa (river), used to represent relational connections between Māori and Western world views. The use of metaphor to examine relationships between students and teachers is discussed next.

2.7.2 *The Use of Metaphor to Describe Relationship*

Metaphors have long been used to help tell stories and to make complex or abstract notions easier to understand. Understandings of te ao Māori or the Māori world views rely upon metaphors and stories which Hereaka (2019) suggests “lives in the space between the storyteller and their audience” (p. 27). McGill (2023) also referenced the significance of metaphor in Māori language to enable deeper understandings. Put simply, it is through metaphor that “we attempt to understand some unfamiliar thing, event or state of affairs in terms of another more familiar thing, event or state of affairs” (Botha, 2009, p. 440).

Drawing on the work of authors such as Tēvita (2005), Lilomaiaava-Doktor (2004) and Smith and Wolfgramm-Foliaki (2020), Polynesian (particularly Samoan and Tongan) concepts of relationships and their use of metaphor to communicate meaning are useful to consider within the context of this study. The concept of ‘vā’ (known as ‘wa’ in Māori) amongst the literature of Samoa, Tonga and elsewhere in the Pacific, introduces “a spatial understanding of relationships operating multi-dimensionally across spiritual, social and physical domains” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 3). An important distinction in the understanding of vā is that it describes space as something that joins, rather than separates individuals. This notion represents a fundamental contrast to the “popular Western understanding of space as an expanse or an open area” (Tēvita, 2005, p. 89). In a similar way, the ‘space’ between student and teacher in this study is considered a way of describing their connection, rather than their separation. It pays tribute to the collective need to join together which Baumeister and Robson (2021) described as resonating “widely as a fundamental motivation to maintain close, continual human bonds” (p. 103).

One of the goals of this study was to communicate its findings in a way which enabled the reader to be part of the construction of knowledge. van Manen (2017) suggested that such an approach helped “induce the reader into a wondering engagement” (p. 777), helping them recognise meaning from participant experience. Consideration of the student–teacher relationship as a metaphorical

space has been included in this study to encourage the recognition of such meaning. According to Brittain (2022), the use of metaphor and creative writing styles helps “deepen and enhance the meanings of the research” (p. 2).

2.8 The Role of School Leadership in Supporting Relationships of Significance

Global educational documents such as those produced by UNESCO (2021) clearly linked a child’s right to education with themes of global citizenship, social development and equality. New Zealand’s Ministry of Social Development (2021) described the concept of caring for others, explicitly in their purpose statement. At the same time, the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2025) identified personal integrity, respect and demonstrating ethical understanding, as important capabilities in the education of all students. Research commonly aligns supporting the responsibilities of schools to provide for student needs (such as inclusion, education, equity and emotional wellbeing), with some calling for a paradigm shift towards such school-wide foci (Slade & Griffith, 2013). There were however, some academic voices that argued against the idea of prioritising students’ emotional wellbeing within schools (Craig, 2007).

Ecclestone (2007) for one, has criticised what she calls a “therapeutic turn in popular culture and the professionalisation of more areas of private life” (p. 465). She considered such intentional socio-emotional strategic intent on behalf of schools as reducing a student’s self-belief and amplifying their personal fragility. The notion that students must have their emotional needs met before they are able to learn, she believed, diminished them as individual and resilient learners and offered merely a “political and educational challenge to a social project” (Ecclestone, 2012, p. 477).

Others considered school involvement in a student’s emotional learning as personal and “that schools had no good reason to interfere with, or interact with, students’ ordinary emotional development” (Jackson, 2021, p. 3). Highlighting that changing negative feelings alone may diminish responsibilities for changing their cause, Jackson argued for ‘culturally and contextually’ relevant environments to be worked towards if wellbeing is to be genuinely enhanced. In this way, he cautioned against schools simply teaching social and emotional programmes as a response to perceptions of student emotional need. This supports the earlier work of Craig (2007) who suggested such practices would be unlikely to see improvement unless they also modelled experiences of good student–teacher connections.

It is likely authors such as Jackson (2021) and Craig (2007), who urge caution when implementing social development programmes within schools, are doing so in the attempt to avoid non-relational responses from schools to address social problems. In this sense they align with Noddings' assertion that caring relationships should be quintessential to the purpose of schooling (Noddings, 1992). It is not enough to teach social and emotional wellbeing (SEWB) programmes, they must be accompanied by genuine student–teacher connections (Bergin et al., 2024). O'Farrell (2019) was clear in the role she saw for educators, proposing that “organisations, such as schools, who have regular contact with, and influence on young people, need to ensure that their SEWB is effectively promoted” (p. i). Such promotion, she suggested, could take the form of teachers modelling warm and trusting relationships with their students. With some attitudes and current school practices still seeming to view student–teacher connections as commodities to be exchanged and traded (Parkison, 2015), a new consideration of the professional responsibilities surrounding STRs seems overdue.

Despite voices of caution, a degree of school responsibility to provide for the development of student wellbeing was widely maintained in the literature (Harvey-Flowers, 2022; Macfarlane et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2024; O'Toole et al., 2019). Improved student social development within schools was similarly supported by Farmer et al. (2011) who believed that teachers occupy a unique position as the “one professional in a child's life who have the opportunity to view the whole child in relation to the social ecology in which he or she is embedded” (p. 247). Authors such as Lavy and Bocker (2017) and Pedota (2015) further linked improvements in teacher–student relationships (and potentially greater investments of teacher care) to teacher happiness and job satisfaction. Positive associations between strong student–teacher relationships and teacher wellbeing and motivation was also supported by Aldrup et al. (2018) and Gehlbach et al. (2025). In contrast however other authors (Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Horner et al., 2020) found that the additional emotional energy “required to build positive relationships with students” (Dunn et al., 2025, p. 413) represented a significant addition to the teachers' workload. Newberry (2010) and later Yin et al. (2019) described this additional workload as ‘emotional labour’, with other authors suggesting that teachers may be ill-equipped to meet the increased social demands of students (Garner et al., 2018; O'Toole et al., 2019).

Literature from growing sources linked experiences of ‘teacher burnout’ (Mijakoski et al., 2022; Nápoles, 2021) with poor practices of self-care (Matthews, 2023), an area of ongoing concern within

the teaching profession (Jennings et al., 2019). According to Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016), care for teacher wellbeing was not prioritised within schools in the same way that it is for students. A possible reduction in practices of teacher self-care and exposure to increased role-related stressors, may also influence teacher retention according to New Zealand's Post Primary Teachers' Association (2018). Supporting this assertion is an Australian study of 2444 primary and secondary school teachers conducted by Heffernan et al. (2022), which suggested that "only 41% of respondents intended to remain in the profession" (p. 196). These findings are further strengthened from a recent study completed by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2023), where five focus group interviews (encompassing teachers from primary, secondary, early childhood, as well as Pacific and Māori teachers) showed that a concerning 58% of respondents intended leaving the profession in the following five years. In any regard, authors such as Martin (2025) and Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016) have called for better wellbeing support of teachers as they navigate increasingly demanding workload obligations.

Should such teacher support begin to be made more available by schools and STRs reconsidered as a mechanism to better support student needs, a rationale for why this time in education demands such a change would need to be established. This is considered next.

2.8.1 A Critical Time in Education for Student Wellbeing

Some researchers suggested drastic changes were required to practices and norms that dominated secondary schooling with New Zealand, with research from Fleming et al. (2020) naming a "concerning decline in emotional and mental health we see here among all students" (p. 1). Teen suicide has been highlighted as the third leading cause of death amongst older adolescents globally (World Health Organization, 2020), with some researchers (McGorry et al., 2024; Osterman, 2000; World Health Organization, 2014) highlighting school-based stressors as possible contributors. Chafouleas et al. (2018) suggested that childhood trauma (and their associated negative socio-emotional outcomes) was growing to the point of being epidemic within school populations, with the recent impacts of COVID-19 also contributing to student vulnerability in ways not yet fully understood (Cortese et al., 2020). April 2020 saw 180 countries close schools with peak numbers (1.6 billion) of students temporarily out of school due to the impacts of COVID-19. Azevedo et al. (2021) suggested that these figures would likely exacerbate the exclusion and inequality of "already marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as girls, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities" (p. 1).

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office (2023) described their strategic intention as “improving the wellbeing of New Zealanders and their families through ensuring that learner wellbeing, connectedness and resilience are supported” (p. 9). These intentions appear somewhat at odds with the Strategic Intentions of the New Zealand Ministry of Education which have highlighted attendance, achievement and system stewardship (Ministry of Education, 2024) as the most important areas for student improvement. With regular school attendance figures of 57.3% during Term Four of 2025 (Education Counts, 2025), the need for improved attendance is certainly evident, however a report compiled by UNICEF placing New Zealand 32nd out of 36 OECD countries for overall child wellbeing and last for overall child mental health (UNICEF, 2025), has also demanded attention. These UNICEF rankings (described as “devastating” by Dr. Claire Achmad, New Zealand’s Chief Children’s Commissioner (RNZ, 2025, para. 8) also challenge goals within the ‘Child and Youth Strategy 2024–2027’ which strive for New Zealand to be considered “the best place in the world for children and young people” (Ministry of Social Development, 2024, p. 3). Gaps between government wellbeing intent and child and adolescent outcomes appear evident.

The ‘Growing Up in New Zealand’ study (University of Auckland, 2026) began in 2009 and is New Zealand’s largest longitudinal study of young people. In response to findings related to early adolescence, their study called for the promotion of student–teacher relationships and improved student access to services which support mental wellbeing. They also recommend additional teacher resourcing and training to better support student mental health, suggesting that poor student mental health represents “a serious barrier to academic success” (Tait et al., 2023, p. 13). Other authors are similarly supportive of strengthening student–teacher connections (Burnett, 2003; Carroll, 2022; Flanagan & Symonds, 2022; Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). They particularly highlight the value of such student–teacher relationships challenging negative student self-scripts (DeWolfe et al., 2020) and mediating mood fluctuations.

By ignoring student–teacher relationships in learning, Guidry (2021) suggested schools are “in danger of only seeing the student as a learner and denying their humanity as a person” (p. 116). The nexus between students’ learning and emotional needs are drawn attention to by Australian researchers Powell and Graham (2017) as they considered findings from large-scale mixed methods studies on student wellbeing at school. They suggested that “competing discourses and a consequential lack of clarity” (p. 213) made understanding and facilitation of wellbeing within Australian schools difficult. The nexus of relational care within education is explored next.

2.9 The Nexus of STRs: a 'Care-Centric' Approach to Teaching

As educators, we are “just beginning to understand a seemingly obvious connection - student performance is largely predicated on teacher–student relationships” (Cooper, 2023, p. 1). Numerous studies (Bishop et al., 2014; Golubcow-Teglasi, 2016; Hattie, 2003; Jackson, 2021; Mayeroff, 2011; Osterman, 2000; Rodriguez et al., 2020; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Velasquez et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1986) have drawn attention to the importance of these relationships in as much as they contribute to academic or behavioural improvements. Other writers (such as Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kaufman & Schipper, 2018; Noddings, 1992) have considered links between these student–teacher connections and their influence on cultural competency, student social development, wellbeing and wider student success. According to Chatelier and Rudolph (2017), who analysed tensions surrounding changes to teacher responsibilities in Victoria (Australia), a change has occurred in education and teachers who once entered into a caring relationship with students, characterised by motivational displacement (Noddings, 2013), now direct this care towards their professional self. While Chatelier and Rudolph (2017) were not arguing that teachers do not want to maintain student care, or that it is entirely missing from student–teacher interactions, they do suggest that the social and political dynamics present in education have “shifted the focus of teachers’ care away from the student and onto the teachers’ own need for professional recognition and advancement” (p. 12).

Within experiences of teacher care, authenticity has been identified as essential in the development of meaningful and connected relationships (Kahn, 2017). Teacher authenticity was shown to have a “meaningful impact on students” according to Johnson and LaBelle (2017, p. 423) who conducted a study of 297 U.S. undergraduate students regarding their experiences of both authentic and inauthentic teaching. They found that authentic teachers pushed students to also develop personally from their teaching. These findings are consistent with the work of Tuckwiller et al. (2024) who studied the success of U.S. alternative school educators, finding “educator well-being and resilience can flourish in contexts in which people authentically care for one another” (p. 15). Their findings suggested that a care-centric leadership model was central in school efforts to maximise care connections and ongoing wellbeing.

2.10 Summary

A relationship with a caring adult may represent the single most valuable and protective element in the life of an adolescent (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Couple this with the reality that a student may spend one-third of their time in school-based activities (Exler, 2023) (often more time than any other single activity) and the importance of ensuring that student–teacher relationships model ethics of care comes sharply into focus. This review has highlighted that STRs improve student academic, social and emotional outcomes and contribute positively towards wellbeing and resilience. Such relationships also link strongly to student experiences of success, both whilst at school and later in life.

There are many descriptors used to define the skills believed to be developed within relationships of significance. Terms such as social emotional learning (SEL), non-cognitive and soft skills are but a few and while it is not the function of this research to draw a consensus between them (Bergin et al., 2024; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017), this literature review has highlighted an alignment of principles between the cultural knowledge of te ao Māori and more Western constructs of SEL. This convergence of understanding offers educationalists an opportunity to construct programmes that better meet the needs of students within the unique cultural context of New Zealand. Through the support of STRs, the potential exists for schools “to create transformative spaces that support holistic wellbeing” (K. A. Goodman, 2021, p. 285).

The overarching question of why student–teacher relationships matter in the secondary school context has had significant attention by researchers, especially in the last 30 years, however the breadth of this question has meant that direction of studies have been multifaceted and at times, indistinct. The exact characteristics of the significant student–teacher relationship, especially within the given context of New Zealand secondary schools, appears to have had little scrutiny. While the development of student self-beliefs have been linked to “the social interactions and relationships that students enjoy with others” (Wentzel, 2022, p. 1920), the degree to which teachers influence these student self-beliefs appears complex and is deserving of further exploration. Research also seems scant regarding teachers’ understanding of the STR role and its influence on student self-beliefs, wellbeing and resiliency. Consequently, the way in which these relationships are regarded by schools may be poorly understood. If the nature of care in these relationships is to be considered valuable, uniquely personal, even transformational, then students and teachers can only benefit from improved understanding and a more care-oriented response by educational providers.

The next chapter considers interpretative phenomenology as an important theoretical framework underpinning this study and how this theory contributes to the research methodology.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter One, student–teacher relationships within schools and the importance of understanding and valuing these connections was presented. Chapter Two explored past and current literary thinking surrounding constructs of care within education, looking at those authors and constructs which have contributed significantly to this understanding. This chapter presents the theoretical framework which underpinned this study, focussing specifically on interpretative phenomenology (IP) and the way in which it builds understanding of educational care.

Given that this study drew influence from the work of Noddings and her contribution to relational care in schools, her ethic of care (Noddings, 2013) is also discussed and explored in this chapter alongside a critique of her work. Contributions from other authors in this area (Agne, 1992; Gilligan, 1993; Owens & Ennis, 2005) are also presented as they offer a connection to Noddings’ ethic of care and contribute to its interpretation within school contexts. Theoretical constructs underpinning the ethic of care offer important contributions to a model which I propose later in this thesis (Chapter Six), called The Space Within model. The alignment of the IP theoretical framework to the research question is then considered before concluding the chapter.

3.2 Interpretative Phenomenology (IP) as a Theoretical Framework

Interpretative phenomenology (IP) represents the theoretical lens through which STRs within school contexts can be understood. Philosophically, IP is grounded in an interpretivist position and prioritises the unique and subjective experiences of individuals. Its use within this study allowed for an examination of the idiographic accounts of participants in a way which built rich and detailed descriptions and sought to understand “that which can be experienced’ (Williams, 2021, p. 367). As such, IP offers both a philosophical position and a methodological approach. It provided an appropriate framework in which to explore student–teacher relational phenomena and all aspects of this study have been interpreted through this lens.

Phenomenology had its beginnings with Edmond Husserl (Husserl, 1931; Tuohy et al., 2013), a German philosopher and mathematician who centred on the concept of ‘essences’ and the ideal structure of consciousness (Dahlberg, 2009). Subsequent authors such as Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1969) (a student of Husserl) and Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre, 1976) rejected the idea that

essences could be isolated, instead formulating the hermeneutic or interpretive branch of phenomenology, where lived experiences were explored alongside their meanings (Friesen et al., 2012). Phenomenology has been described as existing along a continuum, with descriptive or essence establishing constructs at one end of the spectrum (Giorgi, 2012) and the more idiographic, interpretive or hermeneutic approaches (Langdridge, 2008; Smith, 2011) at the other. Authors such as Halling (2008) perhaps signalled the middle ground by holding to the value of individual understanding, as well as looking at the potential for more general and relational themes of humanity to exist.

Seeking rich descriptions of real-world experiences, Friesen et al. (2012) suggested that the phenomenological researcher needed to “adopt a phenomenological attitude in which judgements about the phenomenon in question are suspended” (p. 5). This notion of ‘judgement suspension’ was one that separated descriptive (Husserl, 1931) from interpretive phenomenological analysis (Heidegger, 1969). Descriptive phenomenological analysis, while acknowledging the subjective and value laden position of the researcher, asked the researcher to suspend their held beliefs in the early stages of the interview process in an attempt to reduce bias and assumption. This suspension of research belief was required to occur until meaning could be collaboratively assembled between researcher and participant. Interpretive phenomenological analysis on the other hand, did not require such ‘bracketing’, with McConnell-Henry et al. (2009) suggesting the impossibility of researchers truly setting aside conscious or unconscious bias. Adopting an interpretive phenomenological research design accepts that biases are not completely avoidable, ‘bracketed’ or able to be set aside, especially when researcher biases may not be known at the time of the study.

In order to gather descriptions and understandings of participants’ lived relational experiences, IP was chosen both as a theoretical framework and a methodological approach (Smith & Osborn, 2021) for this study. As a theoretical framework, IP drew on the three main constructs of phenomenology, idiography and hermeneutics (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Phenomenology looked to describe in detail the perspective of the participant and involved the researcher’s careful attention to their lived experience. Idiography also contributed to this approach through its focus on the gathering of nuanced detail associated with language and context of the individual. The final important area of influence within the framework of IP was represented within the construct of hermeneutics, where the dual interpretation between the researcher and the participant was considered and focus alternated between the part and the whole of the data set (Laurenson-Elder, 2021). This process of

data reconsideration and reflection enabled a deeper understanding of “the meaning of the phenomenon or lived experience” (Sloan & Bowe, 2014, p. 3).

To better understand the lived experiences of participants, this study required an ethical and moral theoretical lens. ‘Care ethics’ (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984) provided such a lens and aligned well with the IP approach. Care ethics is informed by the understandings of interpretive phenomenology, where teacher care can be subjectively experienced by students and bound within their relational teacher interactions. This study drew upon the ethic of care as a “theoretical lens and interpretative phenomenological analysis as the methodological approach” (Awuviry-Newton et al., 2022, p. 1).

In order to understand the notion of care within schools, its place within broader social and political constructs of social care should first be explored.

3.3 New Perspectives of Social Care in Education

While the need for care within societies is hard not to consider fundamental, especially at the beginning and end of human life, theories around how such care should be managed, where and when it should be extended and by whom, have long been influenced by political, religious and social norms. A number of theories have therefore evolved over time which sought to establish social and political expectations surrounding care, justice and social order. Traditional ‘natural law theory’, influenced strongly by Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas, suggested that humans had inherent behaviours which maintained right from wrong (Mansfield, 2021) and that societies do not need to impose these laws upon its citizens. Natural law however, was also criticised as being excessively hierarchical and where women are usually considered to be “biologically destined for childbearing and child-rearing but deficient in other capacities” (Engster, 2004, p. 123). For this reason feminist theorists seeking social justice and an end to male-dominated systems of inequality considered natural theory as reinforcing of gender-based inequality. The theory of justice (Rawls, 1971) was an attempt to establish a system of equal and fair human rights that were accessible to all. This theory involved the application of unilateral rules without specific regard for individual needs, difference of contexts or autonomy. Within these and other types of institutional and political theories finding both favour and critique from various groups within philosophical discussions, a place became apparent for a more relationally-based system of social caring, where moral dilemmas were considered alongside their relational contexts.

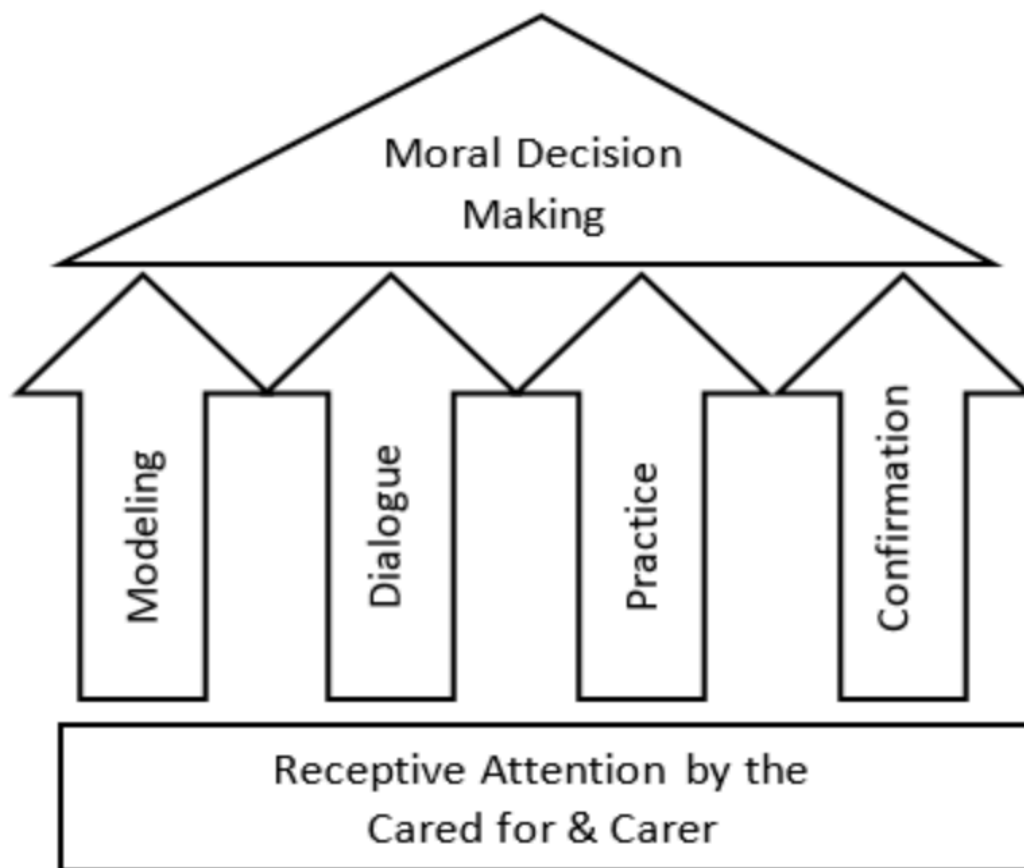
In her influential book 'In a Different Voice', Gilligan (1993) argued for a change to what she considered to be male-biased conceptions of moral theories of that time, offered by authors such as Kohlberg (1958). According to Gilligan, females generally processed moral dilemmas differently to males, placing more importance on emotions and relationships than on rules. She insisted that this historically feminine approach was not an indication of being less ethically or morally developed (D'Olimpioi, 2019). While later schools of feminism such as 'care focussed feminism' or 'gender feminism' drew heavily from Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings' work on care (Mondal, 2023), neither authors were advocating for men to be excluded from care-centred morality, as both saw the need for all people (irrespective of gender) to approach moral issues using an equally valued relational ethic of care (Bergman, 2004). Although the work of other authors (such as Alder, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Buber, 1965; Wentzel, 1998) were to influence wider discussions on care within relationships, it was Noddings, along with the support and critiques of her work, which contributed significantly to the ethic of care within schools and therefore to the theoretical framework for this research.

3.4 Noddings' Ethic of Care

The ability to incorporate care into teaching practice has been described by Owens and Ennis (2005) as "an expectation of effective teachers" (p. 392) and according to these authors, is too often assumed rather than taught or prioritised within educational institutions. The pioneering work of Noddings (1984) described an 'ethic of caring' within an educational context and this work lead the way for a number of other authors (Bronfenbrenner, 1978; Gomez et al., 2004; Mayeroff, 2011; Mercado, 1993; Willsher & Goel, 2017) to contribute with their own inquiries. The work of these authors influenced later definitions of care that encouraged mutual growth and relational development between individuals, however it was the construct of reciprocity between teacher and student, "between the one-caring and the cared-for" (Noddings, 2013, p. 9), which was considered a basic tenet of Noddings' ethic of care. According to Noddings (2012), the relationship between student and teacher relied upon an exchange between each, even if this exchange was a simple acknowledgement of that care from the one cared for. The importance of this exchange was fundamental to caring in schools according to Noddings. Alongside the notion of reciprocity, the ethic of care between students and teachers within schools also relied upon other essential characteristics such as engrossment (later called attention) and motivational displacement. Noddings used the terms modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation in the application of these

relational constructs and suggested that they formed the basis of teaching practices that contribute to ethically caring student–teacher relationships. Mays (2020) later used these terms in creating her model of care theory (shown in Figure 1 below). She suggested that moral decision-making rested upon these teaching practices and had as its foundation, a receptive and attentive construct between the student and teacher. In this model, student–teacher relationships were based on such reciprocal connections and considered highly unique and individual.

Figure 1 *Model of Care Theory*



Note. The above figure representing the Model of Care Theory (Mays, 2020, Chapter 3, para. 7) was taken from the work of Noddings (2002a) and shows the influences to student moral decision making based on the ethic of care.

3.4.1 Individual and Unique Care

The notion that care should be characterised as interdependent and relational was something that set it apart from alternative moral theories such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. These earlier theories assumed the existence of universal principles that were required to be followed. These principles included that the greater good should be sought for the most people and that personal responsibility required individuals to have their own needs met before meeting the needs of others (Held, 2006). According to Noddings (2002a), Kant's contention that moral value is achieved in the completion of duty and through adherence to social principles, was unreasonable. Care ethics in contrast, assumed that there is a moral responsibility to meet the needs of others, in the view of Friedman (2008) "by emphasizing human dependency and the need for substantial care from others in any human life" (p. 540). While there were also those who suggested that care ethics was at odds with the ethics of justice (which include fairness, individual rights and equality), Held (2006) contended that the two constructs needed to be considered together. Held considered care to be a "deeply fundamental value" (p. 17), without which there could be no justice.

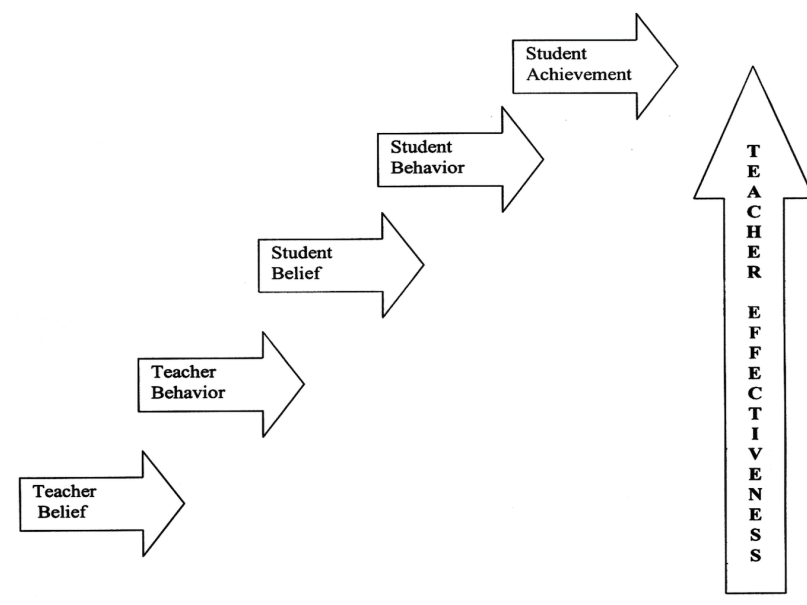
3.4.2 Further Contributions to Care Ethics

Another author seen as contributing to Noddings' ethic of caring was Tarlow (1996). She conducted 84 interviews of research participants and considered relationships to be caring if they were "positive, satisfying, and valued by the referring person" (p. 57). Tarlow identified eight characteristics describing caring relationships between students and teachers, including the important constructs of teachers allocating time, talking to students and the demonstration of reciprocity. Many of these characteristics of care shared similarities with those proposed by Noddings (2013) and aligned well to the findings of participants in this study which will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six. Tarlow's definition of care also aligned well to that used by Merriam and Clark (1993), who considered significant and caring relationships between students and teachers to exist when those teaching relationships "personally affect the learner ... [and are] subjectively valued" (Merriam & Clark, 1993, p. 129). It is this definition of relational significance that was chosen for use in this study.

Despite Noddings' writing being prolific and spanning a number of decades, her early work is now some 40 years old. Over that period of time, numerous other authors (such as Alder, 2002; Chang & Graham, 2022; Hollingsworth et al., 1992; Wentzel, 2022) also produced frameworks that aligned

with her constructs of care within schools. I considered the work of Agne (1999) to be particularly congruent with that of Noddings, as both authors found caring as an essential characteristic of the successful student–teacher relationships and essential to the success of student learning. Agne’s work also contributed to understandings within this research through her contention that caring offered a significant contribution to her definition of ‘teaching mastery’. This way of viewing what she considered to be the most successful teachers “presupposes commitment and deep caring” (Agne, 1992, p. 121). Conducting research with 88 teachers identified as ‘teachers of the year’ (Agne et al., 1994) found that these teachers typically held more humanistic beliefs surrounding their teaching and among other differences, were more caring, trusting, accepting, friendly and highly focussed on empowering students than their colleagues. Agne then developed five sequential steps she considered to be markers of teacher effectiveness. Owens and Ennis (2005) constructed a model (shown in Figure 2) based on this work from Agne and their work was influential to the development of ‘The Space Within’ model presented in *Chapter Six*. The below model from Owens and Ennis (2005) suggested that student success is a product of their beliefs and that these beliefs are underpinned by the beliefs and behaviours of their teachers.

Figure 2 *Model of Teaching and Learning Effectiveness*



Note. A model of teaching and learning effectiveness constructed by Owens and Ennis (2005, p. 420) and influenced by the work of Agne et al. (1994).

This model revised the earlier research of Brophy and Good (1970) and Luce and Hoge (1978) which appeared to discount the importance of student beliefs and omitted this step in their representation of student achievement development. This research project draws attention to the importance of student beliefs, particularly the role that significant teaching relationships play in the students' development of positive self-beliefs.

Further expanding on the work of Noddings, Tronto (1996) sought to define the value of care as a political concept. She believed that notions of care ought to be wider than their context within parental roles, yet not so broad as to simply occupy the more expansive definition of charity. In this way, an ethic of care needed to be applied across institutional settings, with schools being one such setting. Tronto (1996) acknowledged a degree of universality in her notions of care, suggesting that all humans relied on their needs being met by others when they were children. Held (2006) similarly recognised the “compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (p. 10).

In a more recent contribution to Noddings' ethic of care, Tuckwiller et al. (2024) also referenced relationships wider than the student–teacher and sought to include teachers' self-care within broader notions of care between teachers and their colleagues, or educational leadership. These notions of self-care and supportive collegial relationships were considered to have important implications for teacher wellbeing and their perceived omission from the earlier work of Noddings (1984) attracted criticism by some.

Tuckwiller et al. (2024) also focused on the reciprocal requirement of care, where the 'cared for' acknowledged the care from the 'one caring'. They supported Noddings' assertion that such reciprocity distinguished 'caring about' (which can be achieved over distance and does not require acknowledgement) and 'caring for'. This more specific construct of 'caring for', was also useful in its application to the study of research relationships according to authors such as Bergmark (2019) and Caine et al. (2020). Noddings' ethic of care has similarly been applied in support of individuals within tertiary training institutions, with Joorst (2021) arguing for care ethics to occupy a more central role in teacher training professional development.

While a considerable number of authors supported care ethics as presented by Noddings, including works that highlight leadership within schools (Bishop, 2019; Catchpoole, 2022; Walls,

2020), some criticisms emerged surrounding the ethic of care within education and these critiques are considered next.

3.5 Critiques of Noddings' Ethic of Care

Perhaps one of the first considerations of Noddings' ethic of care was that despite it being far from new (with the first publication of her book *Care: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* being penned some 40 years ago), Talebi (2015) still considered it a relatively recent theory. This criticism was particularly evident when compared to the work of such writers as Dewey (1938) or Kohlberg (1958). It could be said that the work of Noddings falls into a difficult area of research theory where the work is no longer considered current but has yet to undergo the level of critique offered by an extended period of time.

Alongside the age of her work, other criticisms surrounded the context and cultural background of Noddings herself. Some have suggested that her background (as a White middle-class American woman) influenced her notions of care and have reduced her applicability to other contexts or cultures. As a woman growing up in Korea for example, Chun (2007) conceived that "different woman have different emotional experiences, which shape their caring relationships" (p. ii) and as such, their experiences may or may not fit the conceptions of care offered by Noddings.

The argument that Noddings' work has been strongly influenced by her own cultural spheres and experiences is one that must be accepted as it surely applies to all authors. With this in mind, Noddings' work should be held up alongside authors outside of white middleclass America. Researchers working within New Zealand and Polynesian contexts offer one such lens and authors (such as Berryman et al., 2017; Bishop et al., 2009; Glynn, 2015; Macfarlane, 2015; Macfarlane et al., 2007) are largely in agreement that care ethics themes (of relationship building, connectedness, agency and reciprocity) aligns well with te ao Māori⁷ constructs and successful student outcomes.

⁷ Te ao Māori. This term refers to a Māori world views or holistic ways of seeing things that are culturally embedded in such things as language, traditions and spiritual beliefs and are specific to the indigenous people of New Zealand.

Other researchers using participants from within New Zealand contexts (such as Clark, 2018; Taleni & Surtees, 2024) have also validated the use of care ethics within New Zealand school systems, with Moen et al. (2019) stating that “caring teaching is inevitably built on developing good relationships” (p. 1026). It would seem then that notions of care associated with te ao Māori and cultural competency within New Zealand school systems and those of Noddings’ ethics of care align well despite very distant cultural contexts. Noddings contends that the desire to be cared for is universal, despite differing manifestations across cultures and between individuals (Noddings, 2002a).

Another criticism of Noddings’ work came from Hoagland (1990) who claimed her work to be unidirectional, religiously based and reinforcing of oppressive and stereotypical feminine roles. To such claims that her ethic of care was an expression of agape, Noddings argued that it was not, qualifying this by saying “there is no command to love” (Noddings, 1984, pp. 28–29), as expected in biblical references. This was not accepted by critics such as Vandenberg (1996) however, who considered Noddings’ early Christian background as being influential to her constructs of care. Hoagland (1990) also maintained Noddings’ use of the term mother and her examples from within that parenting construct to describe care encouraged dependency. She suggested the “purpose of parenting, as well as teaching and theraping [*sic*] which are also part of the model, was to wean the cared-for of dependency” (Hoagland, 1990, p. 10). This author’s implication was that such dependency (of mothers caring for children) would only reinforce expected roles (even encourage exploitation) and that male children (especially) would never learn to care for others from this type of relational modelling. Other critics (Hassan, 2008; Keller, 1997) similarly suggesting that Noddings ethic of care hindered women’s ability to choose relationships and encumbered autonomy, particularly regarding what was perceived to be an obligation for woman to care by taking care of others.

The use of feminine descriptors such as the term motherhood to describe relationally caring constructs has been responded to by Noddings. The first edition of her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Noddings, 1984) was, by the third edition of the same book, changed to *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. The change of this word was an important response by Noddings to what she considered to be a misleading title according to Bergmark (2019). It allowed for “a widening of the ethics of care concept” (p. 336) and encouraged inclusivity, arguing that it was never the intent of Noddings’ theory to be gender specific. In a way similarly critical of Noddings’ interpretation of care, Chun (2007) challenged the

apparent lack of caring for one's self in Noddings' moral theory, instead proposing "the self that deserves to care" (p. ii). While (Chun, 2007) supported Noddings' argument that care should be considered reciprocal, she advocated for the provision of self-care not to be relegated behind that of caring for others. In later writings, it could be interpreted that Noddings (2002b) considered the importance of maintaining self in her ethic of care by suggesting that the self also represents a relationship which occupies the "center of affect and meaning" (p. 99).

3.6 Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Framework

Interpretive phenomenology (IP) represents a qualitative framework by which lived experiences and the subjective meaning of those experiences can be understood. It is underpinned by phenomenological and hermeneutical understandings of the subjective and individual experience. In this way, IP and IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis) include an idiographic focus seeking to prioritise individual experience by closely examining data from small, purposively sampled groups. The use of IP in this study valued the individual perception of experience whilst still allowing for the emergence of themes across the sample group. Within this approach, the more specific consideration of how educational relationships between students and teachers were able to be understood, represented the intersection between IP and care ethics (Noddings, 2013).

The relational way Noddings views the profession of teaching, has drawn widespread support from the literature. Adhikari et al. (2023) reported on the international praise that Noddings had received for her "contributions to educational theory, educational philosophy, and care ethics" (p. 198). They suggested that this influence now extended into other areas of education such as nursing and teacher training, as well as ethics and educational philosophy. Alongside my general framework of support for Noddings' ethic of care within teaching however, I do make some concessions.

The first relates to Noddings (1984) argument that withdrawing care from a relationship brings about a reduction in the ethical ideal. This notion is contested by Hoagland (1990) who suggested "there must be the possibility of withdrawal from a cared-for without a diminishment of the ethical ideal" (p. 111). I agree with this assertion and consider it part of the role of an ethically caring teacher to always build their relationship towards a point of redundancy. In my view, teachers should be looking to transition their students both into and out of close relationship, not seeking to maintain a constant need for connection. Such an understanding is an important response to the

potential (as alluded to by some critics) that an ethic of care may risk a reinforcement of student dependency on their teacher.

Another concern surrounds the notion that the only way ethical caring could be achieved was through what Noddings calls 'natural caring'. As a professional working within schools currently, this brought about two areas of unease. I steer away from the historical position that emotional caring through genuine sentiment can only be the experience or obligation of female teachers. In my view, this is certainly not what Noddings was suggesting, despite her use of feminine terminology or metaphor. Other authors such as Tan (2022) are also adamant that Noddings' ethics of care "certainly applies to everyone, regardless of male or female" (p. 6). This study unquestionably supported an ethic of care that was accessible to all teachers, irrespective of gender. Further to this notion of the universality of the one caring, my approach to teachers who do not profess to feel natural caring towards their students is perhaps more open than that of Noddings. In the view of Noddings, these people could not fit a profile of a caring person or at best could only be considered as 'caring about' rather than 'caring for' others. I have concerns with this binary notion of morality and consider that there may well be a place in a caring teacher relationship for those who care in other ways: out of duty, greater good or whatever their motivation.

Related to Noddings' aversion to Kantian ethics, comes the notion that the ethic of care could not attend to the needs of those unknown or distant to the one caring. Noddings' suggestion was that if society attended to those people close or in relationships to one another, this limited those in need in a wider social sense. While this construct may in itself be plausible, even preferable in societies where people are well-connected and well-resourced to act in ways that support others with the basic necessities of life, such beneficence is not always possible. For this reason, a place for caring to exist from a distance, even if only out of duty or the protection of human rights, should not be considered without merit or uncaring. Such care has value and until such time as an environment is established where an ethic of care (as Noddings has presented it) is accessible to all, numerous people across the world rely on others 'caring about' them. That said, the ethical ideal of 'caring for' those in close proximity to each other can still be worked towards wherever possible.

3.7 Theoretical Alignment to the Research Question

What are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?

This research question focused on student descriptions of their significant teacher relationships, the characteristics of such connections and how these connections influenced their perspectives and self-beliefs. I considered the student–teacher relationship to be a phenomenon, event or experience, able to be observed and where rich and detailed accounts of lived experiences could be explored and given meaning. As such, it demanded an interpretative philosophical position where subjective and individual experiences were valued and themes emerged inductively, grounded in the data. IP aligned well to such research requirements and it is through the provision of this framework that the ethic of care (Noddings, 2013), sitting centrally to this research, was understood.

Noddings’ ethic of care also highlighted the importance of teacher behaviour in relation to the formation of student relationships, notably attention, engrossment and motivational displacement. Whilst regarding the seminal work of Noddings (1984, 1992, 2013, 2018) and other researchers (such as Agne, 1999; Gilligan, 1993) as important educational theories which influenced this study, IP and its focus on the lived and unique experience of individuals required the researcher to also remain open to the possibility of participants defining their experiences of significant relationships differently.

Alongside seeking participants’ descriptions of their educational relationships, this study also intended to highlight the influence that student–teacher relationships had on student self-beliefs and self-talk. Such self-talk is described by Carroll (2022) as “the script that we use to frame our lives” (p. iv). The notion that constructive self-talk influenced student self-efficacy, academic performance and encouraged potential, was supported by authors such as Uhrich et al. (2023) and Cutton and Hochstetler (2021) with Flanagan and Symonds (2022) calling teachers “key agents” (p. 7) in the promotion of these internal messages. As participants recall their own lived experiences, the intention of this study is that their interpretations will significantly contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

3.8 Summary

Phenomenology prioritises participants’ subjective experiences and attempts to “get as close as possible to the experience itself” (Cunningham et al., 2022, p. 651). In doing so, as the researcher I aimed to embark upon what van Manen (2017) described as “the pursuit of insight into the phenomenality of lived experience” (p. 779).

Noddings' ethic of care and its fundamental notions around personal relationships within education fit well within the philosophical understandings of an IP framework. Care theory is relational theory and has been described by Noddings (1992) simply as a process of human encounter. To bring the required depth to such description however, understanding "from the perspective of the person experiencing it" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 9) is required. In adopting an interpretative philosophical position throughout this research, IP allows an insight into what Noddings (2018) called the "phenomenology of caring" (p. 71).

Noddings' ethic of care consistently challenged universalism and rejected utilitarianism as ways of caring within education. She suggested that teachers caring as a virtue or as an act of duty, was not what motivated students or instilled caring within societies (Noddings, 2012). Her moral theory also aligned well with the important notions of cultural and relational competency (Berryman et al., 2018; Bishop, 2019; Macfarlane et al., 2017) within New Zealand schools. Alongside these understandings of care, IP provided the philosophical foundation and the methodological approach in which the subjective experiences of individuals can be interpreted. As such, it is well suited to the exploration of significant and influential student–teacher connections required for this study.

The next chapter describes the methodology and methods used in this study. It outlines the ontological and epistemological beliefs which inform what I consider knowledge to be and how it can be known. These notions have underpinned my choice of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research methodology. IPA is explored in more detail and discussion includes the theoretical perspectives which underpin other important decisions throughout the research process, such as interviewing, data gathering and analysis. Alongside these, the chapter also considers ethical considerations such as working with young people, confidentiality and the limitations of this study.

Chapter Four: Methodological Framework

4.1 Introduction

I consider relationships to be describable phenomena, representative of “anything that can be experienced in some sort of way” Williams (2021, p. 367). This chapter outlines the methodological framework I have used to explore these phenomena within a student–teacher context. It provides insight into the design decisions made during the study and offers the opportunity to consider the philosophical position underpinning this research paradigm. Having considered the place of the ‘ethic of care’ (Agne, 1999; Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984; Owens & Ennis, 2005) within the wider interpretative phenomenological framework in the previous chapter, the methodological approach of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is examined and presented as a suitable design for this study. As with any research process, conducting the study in a safe and responsible manner is key and so this chapter also highlights a number of important ethical considerations. Discussion then moves to the methods of data gathering and data analysis chosen for this research, concluding with an overview of the reliability and transferability of this study’s outcomes.

4.1.1 Research Question and Supporting Questions

The following research question and supporting questions sit centrally to this inquiry:

What are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?

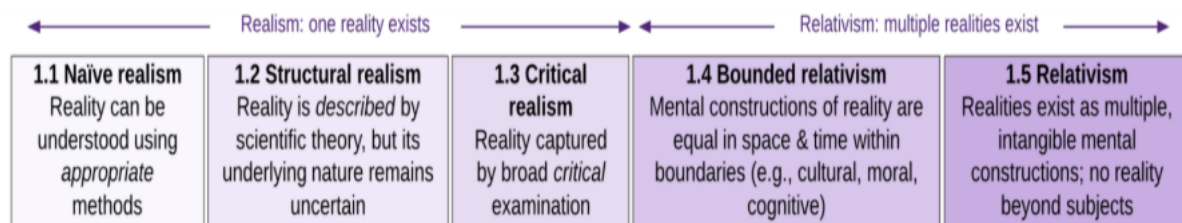
- i. What critical characteristics do students use to describe the nature and landscape of significant student–teacher relationships (STRs)?
- ii. How do these characteristics contribute towards an ethic of care between students and teachers?
- iii. What influence does the student–teacher relationship have on a student’s experience of themselves, i.e. their self-value, self-belief and wellbeing?
- iv. How do significant student–teacher relationships influence teacher experiences of their role and how are these reconciled within their practice?

4.2 Ontology, Epistemology and Research Methodology

Preceding any decisions around preferred methodologies or collection of data comes the question of how the researcher views the world and constructs their reality. The notion of ontology refers to the philosophical understandings surrounding the nature of knowledge, the nature of being and what is able to be known (Hyde, 2021). Goertz and Mahoney (2012) suggested that even when looking to study the meaning of phenomena, researchers were in fact questioning “the nature of reality” (p. 207), therefore making it a question of ontology. Questions surrounding how such knowledge can be accessed, measured or interacted with is known as epistemology. Epistemology attempts to establish “a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing” (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 78). Together, ontology and epistemology provided the theories of knowing or philosophical frameworks from which this research methodology has been derived.

Broadly speaking, Moon and Blackman (2014) suggested that ontology could be divided into five constructs that fall across a continuum of one’s experience of reality. Figure 3 showing this continuum can be seen below.

Figure 3 *Ontology*



Note: A figure constructed by Moon and Blackman (2014, p. 1169) showing their ontological perspectives of knowledge acquirement within the human world.

Moon and Blackman (2014) contended that at one end of their continuum sat realism (sometimes called naïve realism), where a single reality was believed to exist and at the other end existed relativism, where multiple different realities were possible and where “reality exists in the mind” (p. 1170). The realist or positivist ontological view was supportive of a single reality and a single truth and required a researcher to remain disconnected, neutral and objective from the study. It attested that “there is an external reality to which scientists direct their attention” (Bryman, 2016, p. 25) and that this reality could be described with accurate data collection. With the immense

complexities of human behaviour, however, positivism has been criticised as being inadequate to describe social phenomena and unable to fully describe the nuances of human relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). For this reason, the positivist or realist view of knowledge construction was not considered an appropriate paradigm for use in this study.

As researcher, my ontological position supported a relativist construction of knowledge, where a multitude of possible realities exist, each representing a personal truth for those individuals who have experienced them. In this way, knowledge was not fixed but defined by the experience of the individual and because humans are all different, a multiplicity of equally valid possible realities were able to exist. Similarly, the concept of 'truth' can be considered subjective and open to interpretation (Hong & Hong, 1992; van Wijnbergen-Huitink, 2016) or as Maezama (2016) suggests, highly individual and likely to be "influenced by social-cultural context" (p. 72). This subjective interpretation of reality suggested that, while all individuals may interpret their own realities, similarities were likely to exist between people who share social or cultural groups. Realities between individuals within the same religious, gender or other social and cultural groupings can therefore correspond based on moral positions or conditioning.

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) described epistemology as being concerned with "how we come to know something" (p. 27) or how we come to acquire knowledge, with various epistemological positions existing on a continuum, similarly to those of ontology. Hiller (2016) suggested that an objectivist epistemology assumed "that a reality exists out there, whether we are conscious of it or not and that discovering the truth about that reality is best achieved through an accumulation of carefully planned observations" (p. 102). Occupying a contrasting epistemological position sits subjectivism, which maintains that it is the subject (or the person experiencing the object of study) which imposes all meaning on the object being studied. Chinweuba (2021) described subjectivist notions of truth and true knowledge as depending "on how people experientially understand their worlds" (p. 91). A third epistemological position lies between these two extremes and is known as constructionism. Here meaning is leveraged from an interplay between the object and the subject. In this study, a multitude of factors such as belief systems, values, context and creativity all influenced how the participants interpreted meaning from the relationships they experienced. Sabnis and Newman (2022) suggested that "the 'truth' is simply the meaning borne out of this interaction between the subject and the object" (p. 4).

Aligning relativist and subjective perspectives, the interpretivist philosophical position underpins this study. Interpretivism does not allow the application of positivist constructs to questions within social science. It holds that multiple interpretations of reality can exist simultaneously and that while these realities are culturally, socially and historically located, “no single shared reality” (Ryan, 2018, p. 9) exists. As a researcher, it is my experience that individuals see the world uniquely and that knowledge construction is a highly subjective process (Cohen et al., 2017; Mutch, 2013). I consider that my beliefs and social constructs, while potentially shared by others within similar groups and social backgrounds, provide me a subjective experience of events and phenomena and inform the interpretations I make. In terms of this study, I believe they have allowed me to see some things clearly and not others and have influenced the things I considered to be knowable and attainable through learning.

In this study of student–teacher relational phenomena, all participants were considered to have different perspectives and interpretations of their experience, that their meaning had been socially constructed and was only true for those reporting these experiences. As the researcher, I also acknowledge that my own values and beliefs have influenced my responses to and interpretations of participants. As much as I endeavoured to keep these biases separate (by including such practices as a comprehensive reflexive process (Trainor & Bundon, 2020) throughout the study), the reality is that researcher biases can never be completely bracketed or set aside “no matter what we do” (McNae, 2011, p. 82).

4.2.1 *Paradigmatic Position*

The research paradigm represents an amalgam of ontological, epistemological and methodological philosophies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Together they represent the views, beliefs and prior understandings used by the researcher to construct meaning in and of the world and of those within it (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; McNamara, 1979; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). While Candy (1989) acknowledged differing paradigms that could be utilised within social research frameworks, he concluded that the dominant research paradigms applied in educational research were generally represented within positivist, interpretive or critical paradigmatic positions.

One such construct seen as particularly influential within educational research, began during the mid 20th century, with significant contributions coming from the work of Maslow (1973) and Rogers (1969). This view, understood broadly as the humanistic paradigm, sought to complement and

expand on the dominant behavioural and psychoanalytical approaches to understandings of humanity. This interpretive approach sought to more fully understand participant experiences using ethically sound relationships to construct meaning. When applied to educational research questions, the interpretive paradigm enabled researchers to “build rich local understandings of the life-world experiences of teachers and students” (Taylor & Medina, 2011, p. 5).

While acknowledging the variety of research approaches available for use within social research projects, this study selected the humanistic or interpretative paradigmatic framework to underpin its research process. Educational research surrounding the interpretation of relational phenomena (such as that which forms the basis of this research question) lends itself well to the interpretivist paradigm (Noon, 2018). It is important in such research that every attempt is made “to try to understand the viewpoint of the subject being observed, rather than the viewpoint of the observer” (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 33).

4.2.2 Methodological Approaches Within the Interpretivist Paradigm

The interpretive paradigm used in this research, fitted within a qualitative research approach. As such, it was fundamentally committed to view “events, action, norms, values, etc. from the perspective of the people who are being studied” (Bryman, 2004, p. 61). This focus on the participant experience emerged largely in contrast to an earlier emphasis on quantitative ways of understanding research, which were historically regarded as more ‘scientific’. Qualitative research considered people to be reactionary and influential in their environment. They constructed their own meanings which were filtered through experience and through the human interpretive process. These understandings and interpretations were not fixed but were dependent on a multiplicity of realities and events. In this way, relationships had meaning conferred upon them by those parties in the relationship — “knower and known are interactive, inseparable” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 288). Considered to be inductive theory-generating research, qualitative study claimed the use of more “naturally occurring data collection methods that more closely resemble real life” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 3). Similarly, other aspects of qualitative processes, together known as a “qualitative sensibility” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 6), were seen as contributing to good qualitative practice, and were also an important part of why a qualitative approach was considered to be most fitting for this research topic. The IPA research design chosen for this study suited such qualitative practice.

4.2.3 Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In keeping with relativist and subjective ontological and epistemology perspectives and an interpretive theoretical perspective (explored in some detail in Chapters Two and Three), the study of relational phenomena between student and teacher supported a phenomenological methodological approach. For this reason, phenomenology or more specifically interpretive phenomenology, was selected for use in this study.

The phenomenological research design allowed for both the description or ‘nuanced analysis’ of individual lived experiences (Lavie-Ajayi et al., 2012), as well as a reconstruction (O’Toole et al., 2019) and fusing of participant stories. The layering of such stories offered broader understandings across the participant group with Eatough and Smith (2017) recommending “more studies which focus on multiple snapshots of experience and which emphasize patterns” (p. 12). According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), as “storytelling organisms” (p. 2), researcher’s voices becomes inextricably linked to that of the participants as narratives become ‘merged’ and new stories are created. By choosing a phenomenological methodology, the building of “a bridge between the reader and the participants” (Rodriguez et al., 2020, p. 620) was made possible and readers could be drawn into a new and co-constructed understanding of the phenomena.

With an intent to form rich descriptions of student–teacher relationships within this research design, it was important to avoid judgement about the accuracy or reality of the phenomenon itself (Finlay, 2008) and to hold firmly to the interpretive desire to understand the experiences from the individual’s perspective. Working in such a way required the provision of an effective reflexive practice throughout the inquiry. Such practices (described in more detail during section 4.7.3 of this chapter) aimed at reducing researcher bias and became an important part of the overall methodological approach.

Meaning and interpretation of data came from the exploration of re-presented (or re-told) data throughout the research inquiry process. Using IPA, this multiplicity took the form of layers of interpretation (Vis, 2008), firstly from the original experience of phenomenon, to the participant’s experience of it, then the researcher’s construction of participant meaning, and finally, the readers interpretation of the researcher’s narrative (Behal, 2019). While aspects of idiography placed importance on the individual participant’s lived experience and perspectives represented through text (Silverman, 2016), a focus on hermeneutics, particularly modern hermeneutics (an important

contributor to IPA), meant that written (verbal) text as well as the non-verbal communications was also able to be incorporated. Tone, manner and pauses — those things not said but important indicators regarding the meaning of conversation — became part of the data collection process. For this reason, the relationship between the researcher and participant was significant to the interpretive process. This was also emphasised in the study by McNamara (1994) who suggested that “interpretive texts analysed in this study were discovered, not in the end products or texts themselves, but rather in the processes arranged by the writer/scholar during the interpretive situation” (p. 211).

Data gathering sought to identify themes grounded in the data with the capacity to “unearth phenomenal insights and meanings” (Fletcher, 2020, p. 89). IPA works on the assumption that the researcher should be trying to approach their participants with “active subjectivity” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012, p. 33). In doing so, the research process was not ‘mining’ for existing information or themes that emerged, but rather generating the narrative from participant semi-structured interview conversations. This idea of generating rather than discovering themes was congruent to the concept of an interpretive thematic analysis methodology. Thematic analysis will be described in more detail later in section 4.6.1 of this chapter.

4.2.4 Summary

The lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships represented a phenomenon that was best described within an interpretive phenomenological research framework. The hermeneutic circle used within the IPA approach (Gadamer, 1975; Gyollai, 2020; Heidegger, 1967) was foundational to interpretive phenomenological analysis and allowed for the circular interpretation of text. It held that any understanding of the whole was reached by referencing and understanding the specific parts, which must in turn be understood in relation to the whole. In this study, understanding the phenomenon of the student–teacher relationship, from the specific to the general and back to the specific again, encouraged the building of a multi-layered narrative and helped describe the nature and landscape of the relationship between each. Using IPA, this study sought to uncover the lived experiences of participants within STRs and explore the meaning and understandings they attach to them (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As previously mentioned, adopting a ‘phenomenological attitude’ (Peoples, 2021) involved understanding contexts through rich descriptions of the relational phenomena (the context of the

stories) and was central to later data interpretation. The decision to use an interpretive phenomenological approach had implications for how the research took place, who was to be involved, as well as how data was collected and later analysed. Conducting this study safely required attention to a number of important ethical considerations and these are discussed next.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Final ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Waikato on December 7, 2022 (see Appendix K), however, attention to ethical ideals was maintained throughout the research process and moved beyond the requirements of confidentiality and consent. As a researcher working with six Year 13 students as well as four adult teachers, I considered my ethical obligations using a lens of youth involvement in the research processes (Clark et al., 2022; Hawke et al., 2018). Alderson (2004) discussed three main ethical frameworks which she suggested represented ways of thinking about ethics in good research. One of these frameworks she called “rights-based research” (p. 98), required the researcher to consider ‘the 3 Ps’ of: provision of basic needs, protection from harm and participation rights of the child. Although useful broad descriptors in considering the purpose of ethics within research, I found it more constructive to consider these ethical obligations within the context of specific categories related to the research design and decisions made. The first of these categories outlined specific considerations when working with young people as participants in research.

4.3.1 Research Involving Young People

According to Brady et al. (2023), “children and young people (CYP) have a right to be involved in things that affect them” (p. 2). The importance of this involvement also related to the unique perspectives that young people brought to the research process and their differing interpretive schemes (Best, 2007). MacNeil and McClean (2006) described the involvement of young people in research as the inclusion of a “rightful voice” (p. 103), seeing it as central to the process of understanding and exploring questions that relate to youth. For this reason, the participation of students in this study’s exploration of student–teacher relationships was considered essential in telling the story of their lived experiences.

With age and developmental stage of young people representing a continuum of possible participant competence, the idea that all young people should fit into predetermined areas of need

seemed oversimplistic. Developmental logic applied by an adult researcher, as if it were a blueprint to be considered applicable to all young people within research processes, was cautioned against by Raby (2007). With this in mind, all attempts were made by the researcher to maintain high levels of safety and accessibility for “competent and active participants” (Smith, 2010, p. 107), whilst remaining responsive to the individual needs and requirements of each of the students taking part. These provisions included the awareness of age-related power differences, time spent ensuring informed consent, confidentiality and the provision of care before, during and after the interview process (Loveridge et al., 2023).

4.3.2 Participant Selection

The decision to choose Year 13 students as participants was made for a number of reasons including the increased likelihood that students at this age might engage in what Høffding and Martiny (2015) described as a form of partnership with the researcher. In doing so, the process of research involvement (where students were listened to, valued and empowered to tell their stories) was designed to be a positive and affirming experience. Students in their final year of secondary education were also considered more likely to have encountered a number of different teachers throughout their time in school and for this reason, were considered more likely to have experienced a positively significant or influential teacher connection. As students of 17–19 years of age, they were also more likely to be independent, have their own transport to attend interviews off school grounds if required and able to self-consent to participate if they wished.

Attempts to avoid placing the researcher as ‘the expert’ was an important aspect of the methodological approach and participants were encouraged to share some decisions (and therefore power) throughout the process. Cook-Sather and Beattie (2018) referred to an “entrenched student–teacher paradigm” (p. 9), which in their view required shifting so that the teacher could be removed as the expert. Student participants’ previous experiences of sharing power with adults considered to be in positions of authority (as they may consider the researcher to be) was unknown. For this reason, extra care was taken to ensure historical student–teacher power practices did not automatically extend into the participant-researcher relationship. This research attempted to “shift that locus of authority and attend to young people’s own interpretive frames of analysis” (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 7), thereby authorising the students as ‘knowers’ (Cook-Sather, 2023). In all respects, this study sought to do research with, rather than to or about, young people (Leonard, 2007; Robinson & Kellett, 2004; Watson et al., 2023) in the belief that such an approach was “much

more likely to produce rich, meaningful data than research done on children” Leonard (2007, p. 133).

4.3.3 Informed Consent

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has very clear views on the values of including the voice of young people in their future, “assuring to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views, the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 3). McMellon and Tisdall (2020) argued that youth participation has historically been “too easily side-lined” (p. 173) with Lewis-Dagnell et al. (2023) suggesting that “there is both a legal and moral obligation to ensure all children’s voices are heard and listened to” (p. 15).

Engaging youth to participate in this research required their access to as much information as possible. Table 1 below outlines participant data collection and communication timeframes, including how information was shared between the researcher and key stakeholders.

Table 1 *Participant Data Collection and Communication Timeframes*

Date	Those involved	Purpose of communication
2022		
07—Dec—22	Researcher	Ethics approval granted
Dec (mid)	Principals of participant schools	Information letter sent outlining study and requesting school participation
2023		
Feb	Principals of participant schools	Follow up emails to confirm school interest / involvement
Mar	Full Year 13 cohort of schools participating	Assembly presentations and completion of Survey Monkey questionnaire
Mar	Possible student participants	Letter sent outlining detail of study and asking for participation
Mar	Student participants	Met with individually to confirm participation and background information
Mar	Possible teacher participants	Letter sent outlining detail of study and asking for participation
Mar	Teacher participants	Met with individually to confirm participation and background information
Apr	All participants	All participants met to complete individual semi-structured interviews
May (early)	Researcher	Data transcribed from individual interviews / NVivo programme
May	All participants	Emailed transcripts of individual data to member check
June (early)	All participants	All participants met to complete focus group interviews
June	Researcher	Data transcribed from focus group interviews
July	All participants	Emailed transcripts of focus group data to member check
Aug—Dec	Researcher	Collate and analyse data

Note. The above table outlines when key communications occurred during the study and who was involved in those communications. It also includes the dates of participant data collection and analysis.

As referenced in Table 1 above, students in this study were sent a letter in March 2023 outlining the structure and duration of interviews, confidentiality, as well as use and storage of their data. Information sharing also occurred during initial meetings and throughout the research process. As researcher, my aim was to encourage participants' input into decisions and where possible allow access to information that was both free from coercion and appropriately considered. However, accessing youth to take part in research from within educational institutions, such as schools, brought with it a number of challenges.

Adults commonly act in roles of gatekeepers and are often approached to provide consent on behalf of young people, revealing "the differing power relationships between adults and children in the research process" (Leonard, 2007, p. 134). This research sought to reduce traditional power imbalances and while adult and institutional consent was sought and granted in order for the research to proceed, it was made clear to the young people considering taking part in this study that adult consent did not equate to their consent. Individual meetings with possible participants prior to the beginning the study was an important way of ensuring that individual informed consent was achieved from each participant. Good communication (surrounding such things as the expected duration of interviews) was important at all stages of the research project, with a belief that this clear signposting of information was particularly valuable with young people as participants (McNeilly et al., 2020).

The potential for young people to comply with perceived adult needs (such as their involvement in this research) was a risk I sought to minimise. Student participants needed to see the researcher in this study not as another teacher to be complied with, and efforts were made to ensure students were aware that the research was non-school based and that no other school connections existed. In this way, external influences that may have prejudiced their decisions to be involved in the study were reduced, in the hope that students would be "completely free to decide either way" (Nairn & Clarke, 2012, p. 186). This consent was not a single process gained prior to beginning the research and not considered again, rather it represented a process of continued reflection and re-checking with participants as the research progressed. This study worked on the assumption that participant impact, and their availability to be part of the research process, may have changed from the

experience of it (O'Reilly et al., 2011). For this reason, permission was sought and re-sought throughout the pre-interview, interview and member checking processes. Participants in this study were reminded regularly of their right to reconsider or indeed withdraw their consent altogether.

4.3.4 Confidentiality

One of the ways in which participants were kept safe whilst taking part in this research process was through maintaining the privacy of their personal data and confidentiality (Kang & Hwang, 2021). Anonymity and confidentiality are part of the researcher's obligations to protect the participant (Cohen et al., 2017) and the intention for this study was for participants to be able to "exercise control over information relating to their knowledge and heritage and to themselves" (Battiste, 2008, p. 8). In a school environment however, where the identity of participants may be inadvertently discovered as part of the consent process, complete anonymity was hard to assure. Along with the compliance required to meet school safety obligations, participants were also involved in focus group meetings and so anonymity was not a realistic expectation. Confidentiality however was achieved, with only the researcher knowing the exact contribution each participant had made to the final document. As such, an assurance could be made to participants that the researcher would "in no way make the connection known publicly" (Cohen et al., 2005, p. 62) and participant confidentiality was maintained.

The final way in which the participant's confidentiality was upheld was in the publication of the final published document. This document was constructed in such a way that the identities of the participants in the study were hidden to the reader and that no link existed between them and their story that could be used to identify them in any way (Anderson, 2019; Cohen et al., 2017). For the purposes of this research, the names of students, teachers, schools, towns and any specific narratives which may identify participants in any way have been changed. Data from personal interviews, any accompanying diagrams or drawings and transcripts have similarly been rigorously protected by the use of pseudonyms.

4.3.5 Do No Harm

Care of participants involved in this research process was vital not only for the purposes of gaining permission to conduct the study, but also because this particular research topic held the moral ethic of care in relationships as foundational to educational requirements at all levels. The

moral responsibility of the researcher was to ensure not only that there was significant value in the research outcomes for the community the research was serving, but also that the principle of 'do no harm' (Alderson, 2004; Cohen et al., 2017; O'Connell & Lynch, 2020) was adhered to and that steps were taken "to prevent risk or harm to participants" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 306). Supporting the emotional safety of participants during the study was an example of the researcher's obligation, especially as participants included young people. Throughout the research process, an awareness of the potential impact of having research conversations with participants was maintained by being "attentive to ethical issues long after leaving the field and composing final research texts" (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 545). One example of this attentiveness on behalf of the researcher occurred when following up on the wellbeing of one student participant (consent had been obtained from the student to do so) with their school counsellor after their individual interview. This conversation ensured their mood was positive and that if that changed, they had support people in place.

Despite the sensitivity required in managing conversations with participants, Powell and Smith (2009) remind researchers that the consequences of excluding young people based on the potential for their fear or distress "can be more harmful, as children are denied the opportunity to gain the benefits associated with participation, including education, therapy and empowerment" (p. 129). Watson et al. (2023) reported that a key benefit to young people taking part in studies such as this, was their "feeling like they are making a difference" (p. 1502) in areas concerning them. The intention throughout this research was for all those involved to experience their participation as positive, and whilst feedback regarding this was not sought directly, both student and teacher participants reported enjoying the research process.

This research was designed to give voice to students in New Zealand schools, which Allan and Duckworth (2018) suggested is a "a strategy for self-empowerment for young people" (p. 44). By being involved in the formal process of research, the opportunity for participants to grow from the validation of their significant student-teacher connections was intentional. Looking at the notion of student agency in rural Vermont, Adreon (2022) suggested that "incorporating youth into research in an authentic way, values their voices and provides them with an avenue to develop agency" (p. 22). Offering participants a forum to express and make meaning of successful and significant student-teacher relationships (as this research has done) has hopefully contributed to this agency. Similarly, offering opportunities to manage emotion and examine relationships through the process of their involvement in this research project, has supported the growth of socio-emotional skills in

both students and teachers (O'Toole et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Tolan et al., 2016), which has in turn been linked to improved wellbeing and resilience (O'Toole et al., 2019). For the teachers taking part in this study, a rare opportunity was offered to have their relational capacity with students celebrated and considered in terms of their teaching practice. All of the teachers involved in this study had taken time and travelled to be part of the focus group meeting, despite their heavy work and life schedules. Regardless of this, they considered the interview time to be valuable and supportive, with one teacher saying that their conversation had indeed felt "healing" (Ben: t).

The next part of this chapter considers the specific processes used to gather and analyse data. Other considerations such as the strengths and limitations of this study, data reliability and the transferability of these research findings to other contexts are also discussed.

4.4 Data Gathering

4.4.1 Research Participant Selection Processes: Purposive Sampling

This study was conducted across two groups of participants: one group (of six individuals) being made up of Year 13 students and another group (of four individuals) comprising secondary school teachers. Whilst generalisability of data was not sought with this type of qualitative study, selecting participants in a purposive manner (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Qamar, 2021) from a group sharing some degree of commonality, such as age, geographic location and social grouping, was a way to acknowledge participant context for the reader. It also reduced the explanation of experience through difference in circumstance. For this reason, student participants in this study were selected from a group who shared age and developmental stage with each other (Year 13 at secondary school), were all part of co-educational high schools in the lower South Island of New Zealand and all shared a similarity of possible social experience. While such selection of participants "from amongst a homogeneous sample pool" is seen as important by authors such as Alase (2017, p. 13), phenomenological researchers (such as Creswell & Poth, 2016; Miller, 2023; Smith & Osborn, 2021) also stress the importance of maximising variation as a way of reflecting the unique perspective represented in the population being considered.

Although sharing similar ages and school level (Year 13), student participants were also selected to encourage a breadth of possible views and experiences. Similarly, the four teacher participants

came from four different schools within the sample area, represented differing roles within the schools and also differing years of teaching experience. The six students selected included at least one from each of the four schools, comprised a mixture of gender identification, interest areas and future aspirations. In this way a diverse group of individuals made up the participant group, all of whom were considered not only to be able to consent to take part in the study, but also to respond with a degree of socio-emotional competence suited to self-analysis (Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari, 2018; Demerath et al., 2022).

4.4.1.1 Approach to School Leaders.

The Principals of six schools in the lower South Island of New Zealand were sent letters seeking permission to contact their students and staff to determine their interest in taking part in this study. All schools represented institutions with whom the researcher had no previous history and were also located close enough to each other to allow participants lesser travel when attending focus group interviews. A further rationale for choosing this geographical area was that research is commonly conducted in larger centres but less frequently in regional or rural New Zealand, so this research offered an opportunity to use participants outside of the major centres. According to Noonan et al. (2024) who conducted a case study of rural population inclusion in research within the U.S., their study indicated “significant differences in race, sex, and age between rural and non-rural participants” (p. 1). For this reason, the opportunity to gather data outside of urban New Zealand centres was considered valuable. These schools also offered a broad cross-section of school cultures, bringing depth and diversity to the research.

Of the four schools who agreed to be part of this research, all were either state schools or state integrated special character schools. Although not by design, the schools that agreed to take part in this study were also all co-educational and had students beginning in either Year 7 or Year 9 and finishing in Year 13. Some were urban based schools, while others were located within small towns servicing more rural communities. The schools were referred to using the pseudonyms of Northern High School, Southern Collegiate, Eastern College and Western City College as a way of protecting their anonymity. One of the four teachers participating in this study had since moved to a new school outside of the sample area, however their comments refer to the original school from which they were nominated and to their student connections at this school.

4.4.1.2 Invitation to Students and Teachers.

Of the six schools approached, four schools agreed to their Year 13 student cohort receiving an introductory PowerPoint presentation and short questionnaire (see Appendices A and B). These schools also allowed the researcher to contact individual members of their teaching staff if any of those staff members had been identified by a Year 13 student in their school as significant or influential to them. A pilot group of Year 13 students at a separate school (not involved in the research) had previously given feedback regarding clarity and understanding of both the PowerPoint presentation and associated questionnaire.

Following the PowerPoint presentation, pre-participant information was provided to the Year 13 group, along with an invitation to complete the short questionnaire (see Appendix B). Although the questionnaire is a tool most often associated with quantitative studies, it was used in this study to seek information from a relatively large number of individuals, reducing the sample size to one which could then be provided more nuanced information. For this reason, the use of a basic questionnaire was seen as “an optimal resource for gathering information” (Palenzuela-Luis et al., 2022, p. 1). Busetto et al. (2020) suggest that using questionnaires within qualitative research makes it possible to “widen the reach of the research to more respondents” (p. 6).

One definition provided to the Year 13 cohorts of the terms ‘significant and influential relationship’ was in keeping with the definition developed by Merriam and Clark (1993) suggesting that relationships can be seen as significant when they are both ‘affective and valuable’ to the student. However, personal interpretation and definition of what constituted a ‘significant connection’ with teachers, intentionally remained with students to allow a degree of self-determination. In allowing participants the opportunity to decide which teaching relationships were significant to them and to what degree, a level of co-construction (Krane et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2021) between participants and researcher took place.

During the questionnaire, those students who responded as experiencing a significant teacher connection also completed a Likert Scale continuum indicating the level of significance they considered their student–teacher relationship to hold. Students who considered this connection as being at or above six out of ten and who were interested in hearing more about the study to determine their desire to take part, were met with individually. These early introductory meetings allowed conversations between the researcher and possible participants to confirm their

understanding of the study and triangulate Likert Scale scores through the process of member checking. In this way, “the interpretive claims that are being made” (Torrance, 2012, p. 114) within the initial data collection were checked. These early meetings also provided the opportunity to gather basic information regarding possible participants, such as ethnicity, family size and dynamic, future aspirations and wider interests. This information allowed for a degree of purposive sampling (discussed earlier in section 4.4.1).

Those students who indicated experiencing a significant student–teacher relationship, but who did not wish to take part in the study themselves, were asked to consider allowing the researcher to approach the teacher they had this relationship with. This allowed a selection of teachers (identified by students not taking part in the study) to be approached to participate. Additional information was gathered (similarly to the student group) during individual pre-selection meetings with possible teacher participants. Having satisfied the requirement for some diversity amongst teacher participants (including the need to have one teacher from each of the four schools), four teachers were selected at random. Those teachers selected and agreeing to participate in the research had the identity of their nominating student shared with them during their later individual interview. Knowledge of this student’s identity allowed the teacher to reflect and comment on the specific relationship concerning that student. Permission to share this identity had already been granted by the student concerned during the questionnaire process.

Table 2 *Summary of Study Participants*

Student	Student Age Range	Gender Identification	School Association
1.Aroha	17–19 Years	Female	Northern High School
2.Vaughn	17–19 Years	Male	Southern Collegiate
3.Vanessa	17–19 Years	Female	Southern Collegiate
4.Maddi	17–19 Years	Female	Eastern College
5.Casey	17–19 Years	Male	Western City College
6.Charlotte	17–19 Years	Female	Western City College
Teachers			
1.Alice		Female	Northern High School
2.Ben		Male	Southern Collegiate
3.Molly		Female	Western City College
4.Chelsea		Female	Eastern College

Note. Table 2 above outlines core information regarding research participants.

Participating students and teachers then met individually with the researcher and were provided more detailed written explanations of the process and requirements of the study. An example of the information provided to students and their consent form can be found in Appendix C. For student participants, a parental information letter outlining the study was also provided. All of those students and teachers who were offered a place in the research, agreed to take part. No-one withdrew from the study at any time. As more applicants were wanting to participate in the study than were required to fill participant places, the above selection process was shared with all prospective applicants in an emailed letter that went out after the participant selection had been made.

A small number of students (four out of more than 100 Year 13 students sampled across the four participating schools) expressed that while they had experienced a significant and influential teaching relationship, they did not wish for their teacher to know their identity, or to be involved in the study themselves.

4.5 Interviews with Individuals and Groups

A semi-structured interview falls along a continuum of possible interview processes defined by Cohen et al. (2005) as “a two person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information” (p. 286). At the structured end of the continuum lies interviews with strict questions and where respondents are kept to information pertinent only to these. In contrast to this are the unstructured interviews, where participants effectively self-direct the conversation with little focus. Sitting more towards the unstructured end but not lacking direction and focus, is the semi-structured interview. This type of interview looks to take advantage of both ends of the interview spectrum where “the researcher has a list of questions but there is scope for participants to raise issues that the researcher has not anticipated” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 78).

4.5.1 Individual Interviews: The Inquiry into Personal Experience

With this research design using an interpretive phenomenological framework, the semi-structured interview process was selected as a tool to “invite participants to articulate stories” (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 100). In using a methodology associated with this framework, care was taken, as suggested by Høffding and Martiny (2015), to ensure the interview and interview questions integrated the “qualitative interview with phenomenological philosophy” (p. 2) and that participants became part of the knowledge generation process. This required first that the participants were considered subjects rather than objects and as such, actively participated in and shared a subjective relationship with the researcher. In this way the participants were considered “the experiential expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell their own story” (Smith & Osborn, 2021, p. 59). The second aspect of the phenomenological philosophy required the researcher to understand that the analysis of the interview was not fixed, but subject to developing interpretations. Details of the phenomenological interview process can be found in Appendix D.

The individual interview questions (seen in Appendix E) were designed and selected to encourage participants to share their views and lived experiences of significant and influential student–teacher relationships. The research supporting questions became four headings to which the interview questions related. In this way the researcher was afforded the flexibility to explore emerging notions not yet considered, whilst still offering a focus for discussion through directed inquiry. The structure of questions for this research topic sought to elicit phenomenological descriptions, such as “tell me what it’s like...” and “tell me about these times...” (Sonday et al., 2020, p. 3). Throughout the interview process, questions were constructed to meet the requirements of the phenomenological interview process (Frechette et al., 2020; Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Peoples, 2021) previously mentioned.

4.5.2 Strengths and Limitations of Semi-Structured Interviews

One of the benefits of this type of interviewing lay in the researcher’s ability to gather rich and deep data especially useful in understanding the subjective experiences. Interviewing in this way provided the researcher a ‘window’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) through which the lived experience of participants was able to be understood. This metaphor of the window also alludes to a limitation of the interview process in that it was able to only provide a view of the environment, or in this case,

the phenomenon of the relationship, without the capacity to fully understand its absolute meaning or significance.

Redressing power inequalities between student participants and the adult researcher (often present between students and teachers within school systems) was particularly important within the research design. Kvale (2006) highlighted “power asymmetries in interview relationships” (p. 480), suggesting that for researchers to be objective and ethical, these power differences must be recognised. This need seemed particularly applicable given the large age and social difference that existed between student participants and researcher in this study. Using semi-structured interviews helped move the locus of power towards the participants by encouraging, through conversation, a co-construction of the research process. The role of the researcher was integral in this process and developing levels of rapport and trust helped facilitate non-hierarchical relationships and encouraged the safe discussion of what could have otherwise felt challenging subject material for participants. As the researcher, it was hoped that my counselling training and history of working with adolescents individually and in groups, supported the safe development of explorative conversations with research participants.

While the level of flexibility within the semi-structured interview process was considered a strength, allowing topics important to participants to be followed in conversations, it also held limitations which the researcher needed to be aware of. With semi-structured interviews not being highly controlled or directed, areas considered important by the researcher prior to the interviews held the potential to be missed if the flow of the conversation lead elsewhere. This trade-off between the broad direction of conversation from the researcher and the energy and direction that emerged from the participants, was one that was carefully monitored within my own supervision and reflexive processes. One of the benefits of the focus group interviews that followed the individual interviews was that if an area of discussion was not reached during an individual interview, it could be revisited during the focus group conversation which followed.

Another consideration in this type of interviewing comes from the highly individualised direction that interviews may take. Different participants responded to starting points for discussion quite differently depending on their own experience. Because of this, data gathered between one interview and another was hard to compare and although the qualitative paradigm does not lend itself to generalisability, themes were still considered across participants (Larsson, 2009). Also relating to the uniqueness of the interview experience was the impact of changing comprehension

levels and the interview's reliance on language and interpretation. Interpretation was required both from the participant in terms of their understanding of what they were being asked and also from the researcher regarding participant meaning and vocabulary. For this reason, participants were encouraged to respond and communicate using both word and picture formats. The inclusion of such visual means of data collection is considered by Glaw et al. (2017) to "enhance the richness of data by discovering additional layers of meaning, adding validity and depth" (p. 1) to the data collection process.

4.5.3 Focus Groups: A Shared Inquiry Into Experience

Focus group meetings were arranged following the conclusion of all individual interviews. Two meetings took place: one for the group of student participants and another for the group of teacher participants. Focus group interviews brought together the small groups of participants to share lived experiences on topics of interest and the meaning they held (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These types of group interviews, whilst holding limitations to be considered, did allow different kinds of data to be gathered that were not otherwise available through the individual interview process. Love et al. (2020) argued that focus groups represent an important contribution to IPA, enhancing personal accounts "by capitalizing on the peer-to-peer interactions and rapport, especially in a homogeneous sample with shared experiences" (p. 2). It seemed evident from these and other authors however that caution was required and particular care (for example group size and allocation of roles) needed to be exercised in the structure and management of focus groups.

The focus groups used some questions involving drawing exercises to offer participants alternative ways of sharing their experiences and thoughts around student–teacher relationships. These questions and their correlation to the research supporting questions and details can be seen in Appendix F. While some aspects of this drawing activity may have shared similarities with a counselling modality known as Interactive Drawing Therapy (Withers, 2006), in this context, drawing was offered as a mechanism to examine self-talk processes and to build participant understanding surrounding the formation of their self-beliefs (Van Raalte et al., 2016). For this reason, the exploration of participant self-talk messaging using drawing methods was considered an important inclusion to the study.

As part of the preparation of these focus group meetings, questions and drawing response processes were trialled (as they had been for the pre-participant questionnaire) with a group of Year

13 students who were outside of the study. Similarly, the teacher focus group activity was trialled with a trial teacher group, outside of the research sample group. These trials provided important feedback which was used to adjust the timing and content of the focus group questions. Feedback from these trial groups indicated that focus group questions appeared to allow participants to access a greater depth of experience and recall, around their student–teacher relationships. Because participants took turns and spoke individually about the content and meaning of their drawings, it also facilitated time for all to contribute within the focus groups. This reduced the problem of people speaking over one another (which can occur in group discussions) and where details can be lost to louder and more confident members of the group.

The structure of the focus groups ran slightly differently to individual interviews, to maximise participant inclusion and feelings of safety. These included the provision of food and drink, relaxed introductions and the prior explanation of activities. All participants said they enjoyed the drawing activity as a different way of expressing themselves. Increased levels of safety and equitable participation also seemed apparent during focus group interviews as all participants chose to talk about what they had drawn. Having an allocated time to speak and a drawing to talk about appeared to reduce the anxiety of talking directly to an unknown audience (especially for students) and being the focus of attention whilst discussing their experiences.

4.5.4 *Strengths and Limitations of Focus Groups*

One of the greatest advantages of using focus groups was in the provision for interaction between group members, allowing for the stimulation of ideas, memories and shared experiences. This was especially true for student participants where the individual interview process may have felt overwhelming and where comparatively, the focus group provided a safer and more enjoyable experience. Focussed and yet flexible group discussion allowed for the consideration of alternative views and a collective sense-making of the phenomena of student–teacher relationships. The group process encouraged interaction between participants, as well as the examination and consideration of a variety of perspectives.

A high degree of skill was required to facilitate the focus group process (Morgan, 1996), as simply by virtue of the size of the group, open ended discussions has the potential to be difficult to control. Such difficulties represented one of the limitations of the use of focus groups in this study. Within the conversation, there was no assurance for example, that participants were sharing their own

individual thoughts, as almost certainly, communications were influenced by the nature and dynamic of the group. Those in the group with power and confidence could dominate the direction of conversation if no process was in place to control this. For this reason, focus groups often tend towards conformity according to Barbour (2008), especially if some participant views differed from the strong or well supported views of others. These limitations were mitigated (as discussed previously) with the use of drawing and defined times to present ideas for each participant. In using these techniques, it allowed for the presentation of ideas, outside of dominant personalities and differing levels of confidence amongst participants.

A further limitation was the time required to develop interview environments conducive to participants sharing the types of personal stories required in this study. Time spent creating such environments was particularly important in this focus group process, as it brought the group together and encouraged the honest expression of experiences. During interviews, the researcher's history in working with groups and managing group process in both teaching and therapy was crucial in enabling the groups to explore and develop their relational experiences in depth and safety.

4.5.5 Drawings and Post-it Notes: Additional Forms of Data Gathering

Thought was given to other methods of data communication. This was especially important given that this research in part focused on young adults, where "looking for different strategies through which children can 'express' themselves" (Bragg, 2007, p. 67) was considered valuable. Conventional written or oral presentations on their own would not only have limited the depth of participant responses, but could also have handed power back to those proficient in these ways of communicating (Bragg, 2007). For this reason, alongside the use of drawing to communicate experiences, participants were also asked to bring or discuss objects that symbolised their student–teacher relationship. Fletcher (2020) reminds researchers to "bring their hermeneutical imagination to their research" (p. 23). In keeping with the IP framework underpinning this research, I attempted to promote more authentic and idiographic communication of relational meaning and significance by including the use of posters, Post-it notes and the freedom for participants to contribute thoughts informally throughout the interview process. The analysis of this collected data was a crucial part of any study and is discussed next.

4.6 Data Analysis

One of the most crucial parts of any research inquiry is the analysis of data. Using interpretative phenomenology (IP), I attempted to build understanding of the participant lived experience through the jointly constructed interpretation of the phenomena concerned (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). In this way data analysis within an IP framework accepted the subjectivity of the researcher rather than attempting to reduce or bracket their unknown bias. Interpretations were generated and themes emerged through the researcher's authentic attention to the individual voices of participants. In analysing this study's data, Peoples (2021) has suggested caution, noting "analysis means to 'break into parts', whereas phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand the phenomenon as a whole" (p. 57).

4.6.1 Thematic Analysis

Qualitative approaches are extremely diverse and as such, methods of analysing data needed to be responsive and able to be applied to a wide range of methodological frameworks. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). True thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2022) operated outside of specific theoretical frameworks (such as IPA) and was therefore able to remove itself from any associated theoretical assumptions. Protocols for IPA data analysis do not follow a single set of directed steps but rather "a set of common principles (e.g., moving from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative)" (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 103). These constructs reflected the hermeneutic and idiographic influences on IPA where analysis is seen as an iterative and inductive cycle, and emphasises the continual movement of focus between "the part and the whole" (Smith, 2009, p. 5). In this way, meaning within this study was not fixed but continued to evolve under "simultaneous shaping" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 289). Themes from data analysis occurred inductively and emerged from the data as experiences that share commonalities across the participants (van Manen, 2015).

4.6.2 Analysis of Individual Interviews

Having voice-recorded all participant interviews, the process of semi-structured interview analysis began by using the software programme Otter.ai to transcribe these voice recordings into word documents, which were then checked for accuracy with the voice recordings. A brief overview

of the analysis of individual and focus group data for this study can be found in Appendices G and H. As part of this analysis, three stages of coding (Alase, 2017; Saldaña, 2021; van Manen, 2015) were applied to both data sets with a view to reduce and condense responses to their core meanings without diminishing or misrepresenting the lived experience of participants (Alase, 2016).

The first stage of analysis began by reading the transcribed texts three times in order to gain a holistic overview of the data set as a complete document and where broad themes related to the study began to become apparent. The second stage, sometimes referred to as first cycle coding, involved my working through the transcripts and colour-coding texts based on the development of broad themes they related to. For example, the theme of ‘teachers noticing students’ began to emerge throughout different participants’ responses, so texts that related to this theme were highlighted pink and saved accordingly. This process was undertaken several times until a variety of themes were developed across the data set. Saldaña (2021) encouraged qualitative researchers during ‘first cycle coding’ to code only that which “rises to the surface” and “only the data that relates to the research question” (p. 28).

Second cycle coding formed the third stage of analysis where pattern coding was undertaken using physical notes, mind maps and wall charts. A photograph of one of the wall charts used to construct and develop themes can be seen in Appendix I. Using these tools, theme cards were moved and moved again until they became aligned and their relationship to one another established. In this way, themes were added, changed or simply rejected if they were no longer supported by participant data. Newly formed themes and sub-themes needed to be underpinned by the evidence of specific participants responses. This process took several months and linked to the hermeneutic influence on IPA, where scrutiny of specific participant responses was required in order to understand the larger themes and how they related to each other. Mutch (2013) described this process as “constant comparative analysis” (p. 164), suggesting emergent themes and categories needed to be taken from the qualitative data sets, and compared with each other throughout the data analysis process, not just at the end. Mutch (2013) also supported the use of computer programs in data analysis. This study also used the NVivo program (alongside the previously mentioned Otter.ai) to help sort and categorise qualitative data. An example of how the NVivo program was used to hold differing data sets can be seen in Appendix J.

4.6.3 Analysis of Focus Group Interviews

Palmer et al. (2010) referenced a number of authors (including Eatough & Smith, 2006; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 2009) regarding the formation of protocols for use in the analysis of IPA focus group data (Appendix H). These protocols were used to help build emergent themes and examine them in comparison to the individual interview data. Alongside the use of these focus group protocols, individual IPA data analysis techniques (used with the individual interview transcripts) were also applied. This included the reading through of transcripts several times, first and second cycle coding and development of emergent themes. The use of constant comparative analysis was also supported in focus group data analysis, with Tümen-Akyıldız (2021) encouraging researchers to “constantly compare the categories and codes of new texts with current categories and codes” (Tümen-Akyıldız, 2021, p. 10).

In reading through the focus group transcripts and developing their themes, focus group data was able to be considered alongside individual interview data. Given that focus group interviews utilised different mechanisms for the same participants to tell their stories (such as drawing opportunities), a greater depth of communication contributed to the data set. The use of drawing activities within focus group meetings allowed participants the opportunity to consider their experiences alongside the experience of others, an important protocol associated with focus group data analysis. Roles and relationships were also considered within group conversations and as participants explained their drawings and a focus on language and metaphor was often shared between participants for discussion. One student’s metaphor of ‘no-man’s-land’ for example (used to explain the boundary between students and teachers), was able to be shared amongst participants and support, alternatives or adaptations to this theme could be discussed.

The notions of trust and reliability surrounding the themes chosen and data generated is clearly important in any research design and these are discussed next.

4.7 Ensuring Trustworthiness Within a Qualitative Study

In qualitative methodologies, Cohen et al. (2017) suggested that notions such as “trustworthiness and transferability replace more conventional measures of reliability and validity” (p. 290). For trustworthiness to be increased within an IPA framework, this research needed to be able to ensure that any reconstruction of participant narratives were “credible to the constructors of the original

multiple realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). In other words, research outcomes needed to be able to assure readers that while still subjective and influenced by researcher interpretation (Fenge et al., 2019; Richmond, 2022; Whitson, 2017), representations of participant experiences had been accurate and that constructed themes were reflective of participant experiences.

4.7.1 Member Checking: Participants’ Review of Responses

The practice known as member checking was one way in which trustworthiness in this research was established. Member checking took the form of the researcher’s analysis being reported back to participants to verify that data interpretation and meaning reflected participant intent. In the case of this study, transcriptions, coding and interpretative summaries were all provided back to participants so that they might “refute parts or all of the research findings” (Alase, 2016, p. 90), if they considered that their information was presented inaccurately. Member checking also occurred informally as interviews progressed to ensure comprehension and interpretation of conversations had been recorded as intended by participants. Care was taken especially during the member checking of focus group data, that if differences of opinions did exist within the group, a reconstruction of “an average or ‘typical’ position” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315) did not present a version of data that in effect represented no-one’s view. Accurate member checking of focus group data was made simpler with the use of a structured interview process which allowed participants to contribute equally and explain their drawings without interruption or multi-directional conversations. One additional interview was arranged to ensure a participant who was not present for their focus group meeting, was still able to contribute their responses to the focus group questions.

4.7.2 Transferability: The Value of Personal Stories to a Wider Audience

The concept of transferability was one which took the place of repeatability within this qualitative framework. This idea brought about the “flexible generalisability” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 282) desired to be of interest to groups outside of the participant sample, but did not profess to generate single external truths across groups and contexts. This research sought to describe in depth, specific contexts, participants circumstances and settings as a way of providing the reader the opportunity to compare participant contexts to their own. It left the transfer (Braun & Clarke, 2013) of any of this study’s findings however, as a decision for the reader to make alone (Tümen-Akyıldız, 2021; Weil, 2017). Detailed and rich descriptions of participants and contexts allowed the reader the

flexibility to make such judgements surrounding the application of outcomes elsewhere. At the same time, care was taken not to describe participants and their contexts with so much detail as to allow the possibility of the reader identifying those participants involved.

4.7.3 Reflexivity: Developing Researcher Self-Awareness

Reflexivity is important in any qualitative research but particularly within the phenomenological analysis used in this study. The notion that the researcher cannot help but influence the research outcomes as a result of their own biases was accounted for in the research process. During this qualitative research this occurred through the process of reflexivity where the researcher involved themselves in writing and dialogue to improve awareness of their own process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). In this way, the impact of the researcher's natural biases on the research outcomes was reduced (Cohen et al., 2017). This process was also outlined by Xerri (2018) who suggest that "in order to mitigate the effects of my presence and personal biases on the findings, while conducting qualitative research I sought to be aware of my own role as a teacher and researcher" (p. 38).

Within this study it was important that the researcher was aware of their own internal process and biases, as well as the held beliefs and assumptions that influenced any interpretation of data and questioning of participants. As a way of reducing the impact of these biases, field notes (in a journal format) were recorded throughout the research process. The purpose of these were to allow reflection both on the responses of the participants as well as the researcher's own emotional and relational process (Fletcher, 2020). In following this process, the researcher became a critical component of the inquiry, bringing their own values, beliefs and understandings to the relational phenomenon seeking to be understood. Clancy (2013) outlined that researchers in IPA needed to be aware of "their positionality in their research, which involves an often-difficult analysis of personal values, beliefs, feelings, motivations, role, culture, ethnicity, age, gender and other factors such as personality and mood" (p. 16). Without such reflexivity, projections onto the research without awareness can be made, and while the subjectivity of the researcher in this study was not in question, the requirement for this to be a conscious and foreshadowed process wherever possible, was extremely important.

4.8 Summary

This chapter has examined the methodological considerations underpinning the interpretive phenomenological (IP) research design chosen for this study. In doing so, it has established why this design was best suited to the exploration of STRs. The relativist ontological and subjective epistemological positions that inform the researcher's own paradigmatic position, have also been discussed and help the reader understand the selection of IPA as an appropriate methodological approach. In choosing IPA for this study, the researcher was able to gather the type of rich and nuanced data required to adequately communicate the lived experiences of student and teacher participants. According to Smith and Osborn (2021) the re-telling of these lived experiences should enable the illumination of experience and prioritise the "individual's personal perception" (p. 53).

As highlighted in the previous theoretical framework chapter, the seminal work of Noddings (1984, 2013) alongside the supporting research of others such as Agne (1999), Gilligan (1993) and Mays (2020) connected with the researcher's own constructs of education and how influential relationships develop between students and teachers. The importance of an 'ethic of care' (Noddings, 1984) within school functioning also sits centrally to the researcher's own paradigmatic beliefs. Questions surrounding student and teacher interpretation of their relationships (such as the questions that form the basis of this study) are well suited to an interpretative phenomenological approach and the use of IPA in this research offered a foundation for understanding such experiences of relational care.

This chapter has also highlighted some the complexities of working with young people in research and the importance of doing so in a way which values their unique perspective and privileges their voice within research. The responsibility of ethically enabling their involvement in this study has formed an essential part of this research design. The discussion of such ethical considerations has included the selection of participants, informed consent, reducing power imbalance and protecting participants from harm whilst engaging in the research process.

The processes of data collection and thematic analysis that align with the IPA approach used in this study have been explained, alongside the theoretical rationale for important decisions related to this methodological choice. The strengths and limitations of semi-structured individual and focus group interviews have also been discussed. Finally, the measures that contributed towards the

study's trustworthiness (including member checking, transferability and reflexivity) have also been presented.

As the study began to consider and evaluate participant responses, key thematic ideas became apparent. These key findings and their analysis are presented and explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents key findings identified from participant data regarding their experiences of significant and influential student–teacher relationships (STRs) and it is divided into three parts. Part One: Participant Context, briefly introduces the six student and four teacher participants, offering descriptions of their background, as well as any significant experiences they considered important or influential in their lives leading up to their participation in this research. Part Two: Nature and Landscape, examines participant descriptions of significant student–teacher relationships. It draws together the characteristics that students consider essential in building student–teacher relationships of significance. It also considers teacher perspectives of this relational space. Part Three: Interpretation of Significant Student–Teacher Relationships, focuses on participant understandings of the STR, changes to student self-beliefs and the internal dialogue that students report influence such changes. The influences on teachers of maintaining student connections within the STR are also presented.

During Parts Two and Three of this chapter, the themes of (i) Authentic Connections; (ii) Relational Equity; (iii) The Influence on Student Self-beliefs; and (iv) Affective Influences on Teachers (and their contributing sub-themes) are explored. Table 3, showing these themes and sub-themes, can be seen below.

Table 3: *Research Themes and Sub-themes*

Part	Category	Associated Themes
(1) Participant context		
(2) Nature and landscape	Descriptions and characteristics of student-teacher relationships	(i) Authentic Connections • Teacher commitment to notice the student • Dialogic acknowledgement – ‘listen/talk to me’ • The significance of time • Unconditional acceptance (ii) Relational Equity • A process of co-construction within significant relationships • Role adaptability • Safety and trust
(3) Interpretations of significant student-teacher relationships	Influence on students	(iii) The Influence on Student Self-beliefs • Student intrapersonal communications • Demonstrations of new student beliefs
	Influence on teachers	(iv) Affective Influences on Teachers • The emotional work required of teachers within STRS • Sustaining teachers within relationships • Challenges of student relationships on teachers - ‘The Iceberg’ • The search for balance

Note. The research themes and sub-themes are considered alongside their descriptive categories and the part of the chapter in which they are to be considered.

The personal context of participants and the experiences that contributed to their knowledge of significant and influential student–teacher relationships was considered an important background to the study. The following section provides a brief description of the students and teachers who agreed to participate in this research.

5.2 Part One: Participant Context

5.2.1 *Student Participants*

5.2.1.1 Aroha.

At 18, Aroha was in Year 13 and had previously moved schools to now attend Northern High School. Of New Zealand European and Māori heritage, Aroha described herself as introverted but strong. A significant family event had occurred in Aroha's history leading to past experiences of financial hardship. These experiences, along with her mother's determination, shaped her work ethic and influenced her decision to improve her own educational outcomes. She aspired to study towards a university qualification in the future.

5.2.1.2 Vaughn.

Vaughn, from Southern Collegiate, came from a large family and was well-known in his community. Despite past academic struggles, he considered himself to be successful at school with the support of his significant teacher. Vaughn held an after-school position which supported others and he found this type of work rewarding. He had a strong bond with a close relative who influenced his morals and he planned to pursue tertiary education in the coming years.

5.2.1.3 Vanessa.

Vanessa, also from Southern Collegiate, identified strongly with her mother's cultural heritage and appreciated New Zealand's safety and healthcare. Her serious medical condition and history of multiple surgeries growing up, influenced her views. Despite extended absences, she excelled academically but valued more than just academic success. Her family's religious identity also shaped her worldview.

5.2.1.4 Maddi.

Maddi, from Eastern College, faced complex family issues and lived with a member of her extended family. She experienced depression and used substances to cope but aimed for a substance-free lifestyle. Maddi accessed various support services and valued her significant teacher as an adjunct to these services. She was not present for the focus group interview.

5.2.1.5 Casey.

Casey was a Year 13 student at Western City College. He lived in a rural area and commuted daily by bus. He felt his parents were supportive of him and encouraged him to seize opportunities. Casey struggled with peer relationships, feeling socially isolated and more mature than his peers. He considered home-schooling during COVID-19 but believed his decision to attend school was influenced by his significant teacher's affirmation of his value beyond academic achievement.

5.2.1.6 Charlotte.

Charlotte was of Māori descent and in Year 13 at Western City College. She had previously experienced a number of school changes due to her parents' employment but now lived close to her current school with her father and stepmother. Earlier in her life Charlotte had faced financial hardship and had missed nearly a year of school. She had recently experienced considerable family loss and relied on her significant teacher during this time. She had succeeded in both academic and sporting contexts in recent years and said that she had surprised herself by reaching Year 13. Charlotte planned to explore her Māori heritage and language in the coming years.

5.2.2 *Teacher Participants*

5.2.2.1 Alice.

Alice, an art teacher at Northern High School, grew up locally and developed a love for learning from her father. She worked four days a week for self-care reasons and valued student–teacher relationships. Northern High School is known for its positive classroom relationships.

5.2.2.2 Ben.

Coming from the North Island, Ben grew up in a large, blended family and naturally connected with young people. After a brief stint in advertising, he retrained as a teacher and moved South to teach drama at Southern Collegiate. Ben maintains that he upholds clear boundaries with students but is also able to connect empathetically.

5.2.2.3 Chelsea.

Chelsea was born outside New Zealand and experienced racism and financial hardship growing up. She retrained as a teacher in New Zealand and has taught at Western City College for 10 years. Chelsea has held various roles, including head of department and dean and is currently involved in curriculum and pastoral changes.

5.2.2.4 Molly.

Molly, a teacher at Eastern College, grew up nearby and was influenced by her own significant teachers. She lacked self-belief as a young person but now pushes her students, especially girls, to achieve their best. She was inspired by her hardworking mother. Molly believed that devoted teachers are crucial to student success and felt a strong responsibility to provide the best educational outcomes for students, despite the long hours and personal toll involved in doing so.

5.3 Part Two: Nature and Landscape of Significant Relationships

Participants in this study were asked to describe their experiences of student–teacher relationships. These descriptions included the important characteristics of such connections, as well as how they were negotiated, fostered and maintained. These questions related to supporting questions One⁸ and Two⁹ of this research. Analysis of their responses enabled the identification of four overarching themes related to these two questions. The names given to themes were selected

⁸ Supporting Question One: What critical characteristics do students use to describe the nature and landscape of significant student–teacher relationships (STRs)?

⁹ Supporting Question Two: How do these characteristics contribute towards and ethic of care between students and teachers?

(where possible) to include language and sentiments commonly referred to by participants during interviews.

As these themes and sub-themes are explored throughout this chapter, participant voice has been used to illustrate assertions and to help build narratives of their lived experiences. In this way, individual participant stories support the presentations of themes and describe the relational phenomenon being studied. Where direct quotes have been included from participants, lower-case letters follow their names to indicate that they are either a student (*s*) or a teacher (*t*) participant.

The notion that a student must experience care (or at least their definition of it) as an outcome of their significant teacher connection became recurrent throughout the data and was mentioned by all student participants. Positive student experiences were commonly described as examples of receiving care, or as explanations of what made student connections with teachers significant.

Letting us go in her office unsupervised, is like 'I trust you, you need to trust me', I think that kind of has that message. And then there's also the message like 'we care', like 'the school cares about you', 'I care about you as well'.
(Aroha: *s*)

But she actually cared about me. (Vaughn: *s*)

Just makes me feel like cared for. (Maddi: *s*)

She'll actually care about how I feel. (Casey: *s*)

Students suggested that an experience of teacher care was foundational to the development and ongoing maintenance of significant student–teacher relationships. For this reason, care has not been singled out as a theme in its own right, despite it clearly being an experience of all participants. Rather, it is considered implicit and foundational to all significant and influential student–teacher connections and therefore falls across all of the themes discussed in this chapter.

One of the central themes identified within the data was the importance of authentic connections being developed between students and teachers and this is presented next.

5.3.1 Authentic Connections: “Take an Interest in the Student”

Authenticity and teachers being perceived as making genuine connections with students was an important theme across all participants’ significant relationships. One of the key ways in which student participants experienced authenticity from their teacher was through being noticed and acknowledged in personal and authentic ways. Both student and teacher participants mentioned the value of being noticed in this way.

I think it's, it feels good. When you can actually see a kid... (Ben: t)

Like even when I think I'm hiding things well, he [the teacher] knows and then he'll be like, when everyone's left [the class], he'll just stay behind and be like, 'something's wrong'... like 'what's wrong'? (Maddi: s)

A number of other sub-themes related to the student experience of authenticity from their significant teacher, were considered within this theme. The first sub-theme to be considered under this heading is entitled ‘teacher commitment to notice the student’. It was selected as the first theme to be explored due to its prolific referencing throughout interview responses.

5.3.1.1 Teacher Commitment to Notice the Student.

Student participants all spoke of the value of being noticed and teacher responses similarly supported this notion.

Yeah, she'll really notice — compassionate. (Aroha: s)

Take an interest in the student and their friends, their family, their life — notice if they're happy or struggling. (Alice: t)

He just talks to me and checks up on me and makes sure I'm coping with things. (Maddi: s)

According to participants in this study, teacher perception and awareness plays an important role in maintaining significant student connections. For students such as Casey, being noticed was not only about being recognised and spoken to by the teacher with whom he had formed a significant connection, but it also carried connotations of his teacher applying care to the experience.

Casey: (s) Like I wouldn't, you know, talk to everyone and I'd
just kind of be to myself, just doing the work and ...

Interviewer: But she would notice that?

Casey: (s) Yeah.

Interviewer: So obviously care goes alongside that — not only do you
notice it, but you care enough...

Casey: (s) ... to acknowledge it.

Responses by student and teacher participants suggested that significant teachers needed to know their students well enough to ensure conversations were considered genuine, caring and specific to the student's context. Chelsea explained that as a teacher, she wanted her students to "feel seen and supported in the world" (Chelsea: t). In essence, being 'seen', as it was referred to by Maddi, Casey, Aroha and Vaughn among others, was defined as a personal exchange where the circumstance of the student was noticed, remembered and when appropriate, referenced by the teacher. During interviews, participants referred to the experience of being noticed by the teacher as synonymous with being valued by them.

Casey: (s) I am an actual person.... like I am not just a student - I like
have feelings and emotions.

Interviewer: So — I'm worthy and I'm capable... 'I'm an actual
person'? What are some feeling words that you
would feel as you are thinking that?

Casey: (s) Appreciated — present.

This response from Casey establishes the existence of an authentic connection between himself and his teacher. His feeling as though he has been seen as 'an actual person', commuted value and acknowledged the authenticity of their relationship.

Students considered such experiences to be unmistakable extensions of teacher care. One of the most important moments between Aroha and her teacher of significance occurred after she had

come to school late following a difficult family event. She remembered her teacher looking at her, then taking her aside into her office to check on her wellbeing or if she required help. “It was the first time a teacher had ever done that for me ... seeing that someone had actually noticed and would pay that much attention to their students.... like, it just was so crazy to me” (Aroha: s). According to Aroha, this was a particularly poignant moment given that she had recently transferred from another school in the area where she had not experienced teachers noticing or caring for their students in this way. Here too, the authentic connection provided within their relationship allowed Aroha to experience the depth of care being extended by her teacher.

Maddi recounted a number of occasions where her teacher noticed her mood or vulnerability. “Whenever I'm not feeling 100%, he can tell straight away” (Maddi: s). She went on to say that this teacher “always knows when I'm not good” (Maddi: s), and that this was the reason she had later chosen to confide in him around her mental health and family issues. The experience of having her needs recognised and acknowledged by the teacher in this way helped facilitate the level of trust required for Maddi to eventually add him as one of her main supports within the school.

With such importance placed on teachers authentically noticing students in order to develop significant relationships, teacher insight into student relational need seemed a relevant question to consider. For this reason, teacher participants were questioned regarding their prior awareness of the student or students who had nominated them as significant and influential. Their responses are considered next.

5.3.1.1 Teacher Insight: Understanding of Student Relational Need.

Teachers were told of the identity of the students who had nominated them during their first individual interview and asked for their response. They were also asked to estimate the degree of significance (from one–ten) that their nominating students had assigned to them. Teacher responses indicated a range of awareness.

Alice was aware of her ‘nominee’, saying she knew because of the way that this student had behaved around her and the longevity of their relationship throughout many years.

I think I was pretty aware of that with (names student). She's been through a lot in her life. And I guess like...the first time that kid comes to your classroom in tears, because they don't know who else to turn to or they're really, really

upset, and they just need someone safe or comfortable, then you're like, okay, I've somehow made a connection with this kid. (Alice: t)

Ben said that he knew the group of students his nominating student was likely to have come from. He surmised that the reason these students had connected in the way they had was related to the time they had spent together. "I guess it was probably just time — it was time with them" (Ben: t). Ben also conceded however, that he would not have been sure about the student's exact identity.

Other teachers such as Chelsea were surprised by their nominee's identity. Once told, Chelsea was asked to estimate the degree of significance she thought her student would have assigned to their relationship.

Chelsea: (t) I would guess probably somewhere in the six or seven range, maybe ...

Interviewer: Actually, she put you a lot higher than that — she put you at a 10.

Chelsea: (t) Wow.... are there tissues in here?" [tears present] ... I think it just shows the impact that you can have, even when you don't really fully realise it.

For Chelsea, the awareness that her connection meant so much to this student, appeared to hold a degree of sadness. She said that this related both to the small amount of time she had available to spend with this student and also that the need for this student connection could so easily have been overlooked.

I think there's probably a couple of things. I think this student's very quiet. ... she's the type of person where there's only a few people in the world probably, who know what she thinks and feels, you know? ... there's nothing about her behaviour or achievement or attendance that would indicate anything is amiss.
(Chelsea: t)

Part of the teacher focus group discussion considered how common it may be that other teachers in the profession were unaware of the significance of the student relationships they were part of.

Though clearly based only on participants' limited experiences, teachers in this study believed that across the profession, awareness of student–teacher relational significance varied greatly. According to teacher participants, this variation was related to many factors, not least of which was the influence of differing cultures within schools. “I'm in a place now (new school) where I feel like it's just so different and that says a lot about, I guess you know, what schools have in place — what cultures they build” (Ben: t)

The idea of being noticed was closely linked to the importance of dialogue for the participants in this study. Student and teacher participants considered that being spoken with and listened to, contributed significantly to the building of significant and influential connections between students and teachers. This sub-theme is explored next.

5.3.1.2 Dialogic Acknowledgement: ‘Listen to Me’ / ‘Talk to Me’.

For many students, important and influential conversations took place following a teacher's recognition of their needs. Such discussions involved both listening and responding to students. The importance of listening was acknowledged by Maddi, explaining “like most of the time, he just listens... like he'll give advice and stuff but even, just listening and always being in, like, checking up on me constantly, and like being reassuring and stuff” (Maddi: s). It was at such times that students considered their teacher's attention to be motivated by care rather than judgement or the teacher's own needs. Aroha spoke of the compassion she experienced from her teacher and the type of support she felt able to receive from her.

If you ever have any trouble with anything, not even just [subject] related, go to her because she is so understanding. She helps with like education issues, she's really important in the school, so she can help with all that stuff, but she can also, she also understands mentally, like if something's going on with students and things. Like she will sit there and actually talk through it with you, instead of just telling you to go to your class or actually just go work it out at home.
(Aroha: s)

Similarly, Vaughn valued the times he was able to speak directly to his teacher about matters important to him. “I know that if I need advice from her with something serious, she won't — she won't joke about — she will give me, not what I want to hear only, she would tell me something that

is important” (Vaughn: s). Vaughn went on to explain the value of being listened to and how it communicated a sense of care and respect. Vaughn also said that for him, it developed a desire to respond in kind. “If she's willing to give up the time to actually ask... it almost seems fair that I'm able to give back to her” (Vaughn: s). Vanessa felt that having meaningful dialogue with her teacher beyond an academic motivation, had been very important in the development of her STR. She also explained the importance of an exchange in conversation and its connection to the development of a relationship.

Interviewer: Why is it important — why does that matter — that there needs to be this exchange?

Vanessa: (s) Is that something about feeling valued? Yeah, I think it is about feeling like, actually, we are here as well, we're not just your job. We are here we are physically here; we are people.

Vanessa explained the importance of experiencing positive and validating conversations from her significant teacher. She described the difficulty in accepting similar messaging from her parents suggesting “okay, your parents sometimes are biased — because they are your parents ...” (Vanessa: s). She recalled having flown the length of the country for a major surgery which had then been cancelled upon her arrival at the hospital. The mental stress and vulnerability she experienced as a result of being sent home and back to school the next day was clearly evident, however was not something she felt entitled to express. She remembered the significance of her teacher’s response at that time.

‘It's great that you're back at school, but school isn't the most important thing right now’ [teacher] and then that made my feelings feel more valid, because at that point, that's exactly what I was telling myself ... and he [the teacher] actually made that valid. (Vanessa: s)

While some student–teacher discussions share a context of encouraging success in class, students in this study were clear that interpretations applied beyond academic outcomes and often challenged their earlier negative internal dialogues or scripts. The power of teacher dialogue and the care associated with it was evident in many student interviews. Vaughn for example described

constantly underestimating and doubting himself and vividly recalling an occasion in class where the words of his teacher allowed him to reconsider his preconceived limitations.

She said, 'I've seen what you've done in class, you know all of this, you can get a really good mark' [said with emphasis]. And I thought, well, she believes me, I'll give it a go. Tried my best — aced the test, got everything right, I gave it to her and she marked it right away, puts a big 'E' [excellence] on it, spins it around, gives it to me and goes, 'so you knew all of this, you've got a perfect mark, you are smarter than you think you are'. And that made me sort of, sort of lit me up a bit, and opened my eyes to see if I actually try and believe in myself as much as she does, I can do good things. (Vaughn: s)

In this example, powerful verbal messaging from Vaughn's teacher was internalised to change long-held negative self-beliefs about learning and his potential to achieve.

Charlotte recalled through tears, the words used by her teacher at a time of significant family loss. "She said that if she could ever adopt anyone, she would adopt me" (Charlotte: s). While Charlotte understood that her teacher was not meaning this in a literal sense, she clearly recalled the sentiment and extension of care, and she was able to receive this genuinely from her teacher. The words from Maddi's teacher held an extra level of significance given her social difficulties and the lack of other caring adult supports in her life. "He'll always be like 'I'm so proud of you'... you know, because he knows that other people don't say that to me... he reminds me that I'm worth so much more than I think" (Maddi: s).

Spoken conversations between students and teachers was one area where participant experiences differed. Students commonly recalled what they believed to be the exact words spoken by their teachers of significance and were able to recount these during interviews. Teachers in contrast, recalled the intention of their communications with students but largely did not recall specific dialogue. Alice spoke of using her words to encourage students out of their comfort zone. She believed all students sought safe connections and recalled encouraging a number of students over the years who struggled with self-image and thoughts of self-harm. She said that at those times her language became quite overt and although not remembering exact words used, the message she was attempting to communicate to students included "'we love you, we want you here, you're so important to us' — just being real explicit about it" (Alice: t). Ben also connected strongly to the

importance of the messaging behind his communications to students, insisting that “we all need someone — we all need that person in our life that can lift us up and you know make us feel special, make us feel like we can do something” (Ben: *t*).

Meaningful communication between students and teachers seemed undeniably linked to the opportunities each had to access the other. With this in mind, the next sub-theme considered important by participants related to teacher accessibility to their students and their teacher’s commitments of time.

5.3.1.3 The Significance of Time.

Teachers committing time to student connections and the continuity of this access over time represented an essential component of significant relationship development according to all participants in this study. “Well, because he's been my [classroom] teacher, so [I see him] practically every day, for 15 minutes” (Maddi: *s*). In Maddi’s case, this continuity of connection was supported by a school system (Eastern College) which structured their timetables to allow small, regular and on-going periods of time for students to connect with their teachers. Constant and ongoing connection such as this provided both students and teachers the opportunity to form longstanding and significant relationships. For other students and teachers, their time together (and the significance that grew from it) occurred through shorter, more intensive experiences. Ben spoke of his relational significance developing intensively over shortened periods of time, from such activities as school camp and school productions.

Ben: (*t*) So we all bonded over that too. And we're all singing the music together, right?

Interviewer: Well, I'm just thinking ... you're describing as a shared experience?

Ben: (*t*) That's just like the camp, you know, if it's like making memories together, if you're making moments where you can later down the track, say remember the time when ... that's those moments are pretty valuable I think.

For other participants, the commitment of time was considered significant due to its correlation to a period of unusually high need or trauma in the life of the student. Charlotte spoke with emotion of the significance of her teacher's support through her period of family loss.

Well recently, I lost [naming significant people] and she [significant teacher] was there, throughout all the funerals and ... sorry [tears] it was like recently but um ... she like, she liked messaged me, asked my mum that if I had - that I always had help and if I ever needed someone to talk to, 'I [her teacher] was always there at school'. I just feel like she actually went out of her ways to do that. (Charlotte: s)

The importance of the teacher time commitment (or student perception thereof) and teacher accessibility in the development of a significant relationship, was highly evident in participant responses. Maddi's connection to her teacher contributed significantly to a larger wellbeing plan being monitored by outside agencies as well as the pastoral systems within the school. For this reason, accessibility to her teacher had wider implications than it might for other student-teacher relationships. Maddi described this access very pragmatically. "He [significant teacher] always knows when I'm not good, so he talks to my [subject] teacher and is just like, 'I'm gonna have Maddi for the period'" (Maddi: s). In this way, Maddi was able to be monitored if she (or her significant teacher) considered this to be helpful during the school day.

In addition to these in-school support opportunities, Maddi was also sometimes able to access her teacher after school. In small communities such as the one Maddi's school serves, teachers are also residents and it's not uncommon for students to have contact with them outside of school hours. This meant that on occasions Maddi had been able to have conversations with her teacher at the sports field or on the sidewalk as she passed his home.

For many of the student participants, access to their teachers appeared to reflect and reinforce much deeper messages around that student's value and importance in the world beyond the school gate. Casey suggested that the time and care he experienced from his teacher extended beyond the classroom. "She'd actually care about... how I was doing outside of school" (Casey: s). Aroha recalled the important messages she took from her new school and significant teacher connection. "It's not all just the grades here. It's about being able to become a person outside of school, like a well-rounded person [that] has like the emotional, like — defence" (Aroha: s). Vaughn also remembered

the extra time his teacher committed to his academic learning, suggesting “the fact that she's actually happy to give up her own personal time, and actually listen and teach, really probably means more than I could probably explain” (Vaughn: s). Vanessa believed it was this commitment of time which separated a teacher of significance and influence from other teaching relationships she had.

Teachers in this study similarly held views that their availability contributed to the formation of significant relationships with students. “I don't go to the staff room at lunch times; I just hang out in the art room. And these kids are just always in there at break time... I guess we've spent more time together so we're closer, we've got a strong bond (Alice: t). Molly recounted similar examples of her availability to students saying “most of them I don't actually teach anymore — I might have had them last year but they just keep coming back. It's like the unofficial Year 12 common room I feel like sometimes” (Molly: t).

Interwoven with accessibility and spoken of by many participants, was the accompanying idea of teachers presenting with receptive attitudes when approached by students. The importance of the teacher response and disposition towards students is discussed next.

5.3.1.4 Unconditional Acceptance.

Many students spoke not only of the value of being able to access their teacher easily, but also of the importance of students feeling as though they had been received positively and unconditionally. “He's not a judgmental person at all — he'll never judge me” (Maddi s). Charlotte tried to explain how her teacher's mood was an important part of their relationship and that she always felt “accepted — like welcome in a way — yeah” (Charlotte: s). The importance of a teacher's disposition towards students was also supported by teachers in this study. “You've got to welcome your students as they come in — that's part of it” (Molly: t). Teachers also discussed the benefits of assuming the best motive in their students, despite the situation. Noddings (2018) called this disposition an “attribution of best possible motive consonant with reality” (p. 232) and it seemed that participant teachers were each aware of the need to adopt such an approach with their students.

Ben reflected on his way of connecting with students and doing his best to ensure students felt both safe and encouraged to make the most of all their opportunities. “I've never ever told a kid that

they can't do something and I always encourage them to actually just go for it" (Ben: t). The two students who identified him as significant and influential, were also students who accompanied him on camp in Year 8 and he believed this experience contributed towards his being able to build "an amazing relationship with that group of kids" (Ben: t). Molly believed that "having that relationship right from there, when they set foot at the school" (Molly: t), represented a foundation for acceptance and trust as students progressed and developed. In Molly's school, lunches were provided and teachers commonly sat and ate with their students. Her experience was that the sharing of food was another way of maintaining relationships and encouraged positive student connections. With the availability of school lunches currently representing a division in current political thinking within New Zealand, their possible contribution to significant student–teacher connections may need to be considered (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2023).

The next theme considers how student responses to extensions of teacher care contributed significantly to the formation of the student–teacher relationship. Notions of reciprocity and equity are reported on in relation to the co-construction of these connections.

5.3.2 Relational Equity

As participants explored their lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships, responses appeared to highlight the possibility that these relationships may also contribute to the meeting of certain psychological needs. One such need appeared to surround the importance of student equity. The notion that relationships shared a degree of co-construction appeared to be important to both teachers and students. Four of the six students described their teacher relationships as being 'two-way' or displaying a degree of reciprocity in its nature. Student experiences of equity through co-construction of their significant relationships was considered a sub-theme and is considered next.

5.3.2.1 A Process of Co-Construction Within Significant Relationships.

Both student and teacher responses suggested the importance of sharing power between participants in significant relationships. Casey explained this notion further when reflecting "you kind of get to know them really well, and it just becomes less of a boundary you know, like less of a ... less of a power — inequality" (Casey: s). Vanessa described a turning point in the connection with her teacher as relating to the shared journey of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I think that was another

turning point where I was like, okay, he actually not just cares, because all teachers do care, but he actually understands that this is two-way, especially with COVID, it was a two-way thing” (Vanessa: s). As a teacher, Ben recognised that significant student relationships also presented them with an opportunity to experience positive affect from connections formed. “So, we all would like help each other practice songs and give each other notes on singing — which was a nice interaction to have, because it helped me actually as well... (Ben: t).

Alice believed that having the art room open and available for students was important as it allowed them a place to meet and work together on projects. It also meant however that Alice seldom made it to the staff room for her own break and commonly missed the opportunity to eat or drink. She said that students with whom she had a significant relationship with, noticed such things and extended their care by encouraging her to eat or drink throughout the day.

But sometimes a kid will be like ‘do you want me to go get you a burger miss?’
And then I had a kid in my class last year who noticed that I was never drinking
and she’d be like ‘drink miss?’. I was like, that’s pretty sweet. (Alice: t).

Other students described examples of their teacher relationship using the context of a shared experience. Aroha for example had been encouraged and supported by her teacher to attend a university-based programme in the summer holidays between Years 12 and 13. Her teacher helped her with the application process and generally assisted her to take up the opportunity. Attending such a prestigious academic event was something that Aroha had never thought she was capable of, however it was the dual appreciation that both she and her teacher shared of this experience, that held unexpected meaning for Aroha.

As soon as we started school in the year [following the summer programme], as soon as I saw her, she was like, instantly “how was [the programme]”? And then I was like, “I nearly got stuck!” And then we like, stood there and had a conversation for ages about it and she was so excited for me. (Aroha: s)

According to Aroha, the genuine sharing of the experience, without power disparities, was important in building her relationship of significance. “Like actually being attentive and interested in the conversations both ways. It goes both ways though — the student to the teacher, and the teacher to student” (Aroha: s).

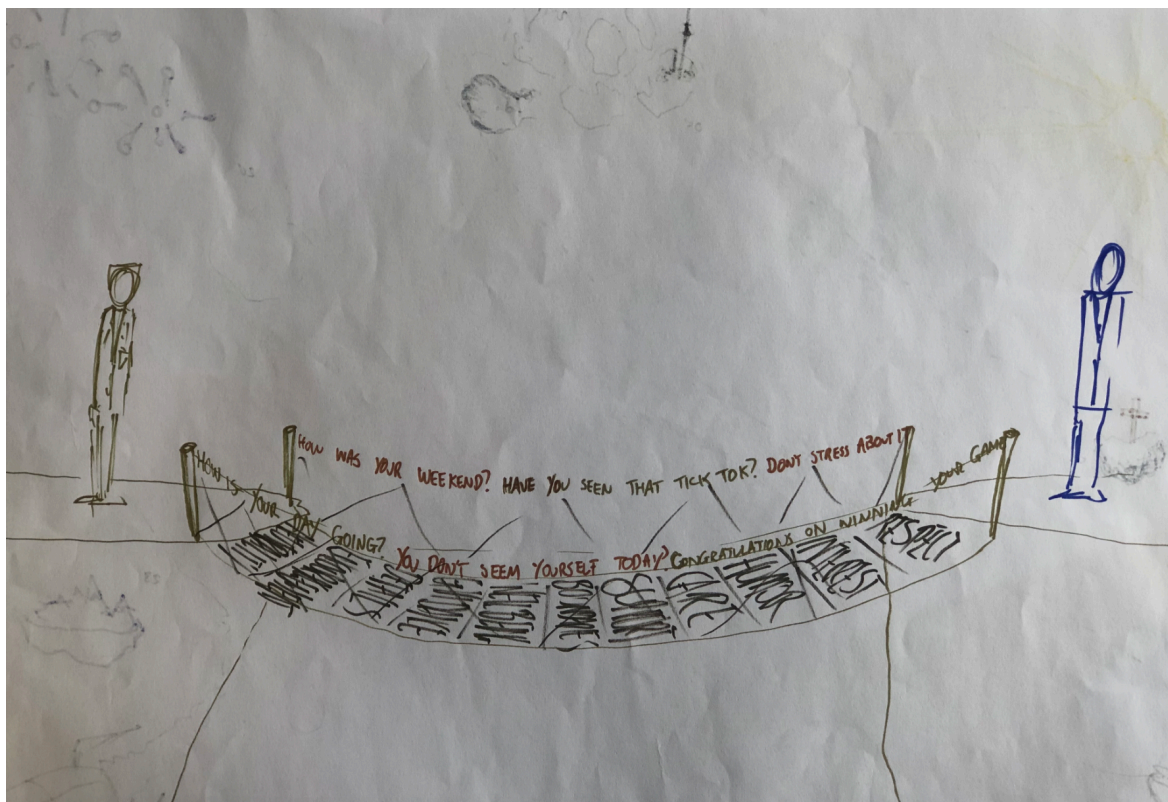
Other students in this study referred to the essentiality of experiencing their teachers as ‘human’ in order to build trust and develop significant connections. Vanessa suggested that teachers having conversations with students resulted in those students “humanising them [teachers] — as a student, you're humanising them” (Vanessa: s). Alice also believed in the importance of teachers being seen as human and wanted students to experience her as “a real person too” (Alice: t). Molly similarly supported this notion adding “yeah, you’re [the teachers] are not the expert — we're human” (Molly: t).

Participants also believed that humour was an effective way in which teachers could demonstrate their humanity and safely share power. Vanessa spoke of the importance of humour use between students and teachers of significance and was asked for her views on the deeper messages behind this way of relating. “I think, that one — that they trust each other [teacher and student] and the other is that they know like the boundaries” (Vanessa: s). The link between humour use and notions of safety was acknowledged by other participants. “Having someone that you could just banter with, without it being like an issue... it just feels like a safe place” (Aroha: s).

Both students and teachers saw the use of appropriate humour as an important contributor to the formation of the relationship. Ben saw humour as an important part of his approachability. “I think the bottom line for me is if I can be someone that is approachable and throw in humour”. (Ben: t). Aroha suggested that “being able to have those, like, deep conversations and the light-hearted conversations as well, is really important and humour does create that feeling of like, safeness (Aroha: s). The link between humour use and relational development has been established (Haydon et al., 2023; Shakir, 2019), with Haydon et al. (2023) saying that the use of humour by teachers “promotes feelings of acceptance, safety, trust and support” (p. 2).

Another example of the positive effects of humour within the student–teacher relationships came from Ben during the teacher focus group discussion. Ben constructed a diagram of a bridge (see Figure 4) to help describe the connection between himself and the students that had identified him as significant and influential.

Figure 4 *'The Bridge'*



Note. Ben's focus group drawing of 'The Bridge' showing teacher actions that improve student-teacher relationships, used with his permission.

He suggested that students and teachers were separated by a “big chasm” (Ben: *t*) created by professional boundaries and that a means to connect the two was essential. He identified humour as one of the contributors to ‘bridging the gap’ between himself and his students.

I see the chasm as kind of like the professional boundary, where you don't cross the line with students, which we all know about anyway. But there is, with some students that you can get to, over the course of a few years, you can build a bridge of 'understanding and connection'. So, I've built my bridge out of kind of the principles that I've always followed when I deal with kids. Just showing respect, honesty, humour, care and that bridge, once it's built, it's always there. (Ben: t)

As students continued to consider the influence of humour use on their significant teacher relationship, references were made (either directly or indirectly) to other roles connected with teachers and the flexibility or adaptability of the significant teacher role in the lives of the student became evident. This sub-theme is explored next.

5.3.2.2 Role Adaptability.

While participants were not asked directly if they ever considered the other person in their relational dyad to occupy a role outside of the one assigned by the school (i.e. that of either a student or teacher), discussion of this nature did occur organically during the interview process. One such role association surrounded the possible duality of the parenting and teaching roles. According to Vaughn, the advice he received from his significant teacher represented “something I should do maybe or what she reckons I should do as a teacher, as a friend and as a parent (Vaughn: s).

The parent

Many participants spoke of an intersection between teaching and other roles. Charlotte may have associated a parent-like connection with her teacher when explaining “having split parents, you're always moving and stuff and it's hard to stay at one school and I feel like [*naming her teacher*] is like the only teacher I have like put all my trust in I guess” (Charlotte: s). While Charlotte’s example does not explicitly refer to her teacher in the role of a parent, the frequency and synchronicity with which she spoke of both her teacher and her mother was evident throughout her interview.

Charlotte: (s) I've have known her since Year 9 cos she was my [sports] coach through all the years and obviously my teacher — I just feel like yeah, I just feel like she's always been that kind of person — not a mum but like, she's ... she is just a lovely person.

Interviewer: But you mentioned the word mum.

Charlotte: (s) Yeah — like you can just go to her for those things when you know that some teachers, you kind of can't in a way and I feel like ... if I was close with my mum, then I could

have gone to her about those kinds of things as well. If that makes sense?

Maddi was another student who referenced her parents when trying to describe her significant teacher.

Maddi: (s) Well he [her teacher] is quite an understanding person. Whereas a lot of other teachers aren't.

Interviewer: Can you think of an example of that?

Maddi: (s) Like, my parents are pretty shit and he's always like, stepped in, kind of thing like, not like as a parent, but like, he's always been, like an adult role model kind of thing ... he treats me a lot better than my own parents do.

The link between teaching and parenting roles was also discussed by teachers interviewed as part of this study. While this brought about different responses depending on their own educational philosophies and experiences, most considered the alignment to be beneficial. Alice acknowledged one of the roles students played in her life when saying “I'm not gonna have kids — Okay? But I love these kids — these are my kids” (Alice: t). While clearly meant light-heartedly and not in any literal sense, Alice acknowledged at least the possibility of a convergence of these roles within her teaching.

In a similar way, Molly alluded to the parenting role in terms of the longevity of her contact with the student that identified her as significant and influential. Whilst being careful not to assume that role, the language she used when describing students first entering the school and the familial associations that existed between them and her own children was evident in her responses. “Yeah, they know who they are.... and my kids, and my school kids know them and acknowledge them as well... they're becoming part of my sort of family as well” (Molly: t).

Another description that seemed to resonate with student participants regarding the role that significant teachers could occupy at times, seemed to sit alongside (but was not the same as) that of a friend. One student who was part of the student trial focus group attempted to categorise this role

by using the description 'professional friend' to describe their understanding of this part of the significant teacher role. This notion was offered to the participant groups for comment.

The professional friend: "elements of friendship, but not a friend"

While student participants did not refer to the connection they had with their teacher of significance as a friendship, all attempted to find other words that adequately described or defined this aspect of their experience. The term 'professional friend' was discussed and considered to be different to peer or social friendship. Students agreed however that a significant teacher could occupy similar levels of trust and influence to that of a distant friendship.

So, for that teacher to actually be a 10 out of 10 to them [level of significance],
or if it was probably more than just a teacher to them — could be more so,
more a friend, someone who has helped them out. (Vaughn: s)

In an earlier interview Vaughn expanded on the significance of a discussion he had with his teacher regarding his future aspirations, afterschool jobs and family. These were all conversations he recalled vividly, conceding that it was as if "half the time I'm not talking to my teacher, I am talking to a friend of mine" (Vaughn: s). Similarly, Vanessa attempted to define this aspect of her significant teacher connection.

I wouldn't necessarily call it a friendship, because, to me a friendship is like
hanging out and going out together and maybe going to see a movie together
and stuff like that... there's definitely boundaries in regard to that, so I wouldn't
call it a friendship. I'd call it a ... a mutual understanding and like an
'acquaintanceship' — like elements of a friendship, but not a friend. (Vanessa:
s)

Maddi found it difficult to adequately distinguish her teacher's role and used the term 'besties' (a colloquial term referring to best friends) to convey the close connection she felt existed between them. To her, the expression described someone who was safe, genuinely caring and offered support when required. Maddi admitted that her significant teacher connection was not well understood by other students and that she used humour with them to disguise the sincerity of her sentiments. "When people ask, I'm like yeah, we're 'besties' ... yeah, they're just kind of like 'ah, okay', and then they leave [laughs]" (Maddi: s).

For teacher participants, the idea that significant student connections could occupy a relational space outside that of conventional teacher–student roles, gave cause for some discussion. In the case of Ben, this notion was met with some trepidation due to his fear of getting ‘too close’ to students. For this reason, Ben responded to the possibility that students may see him in a different role, as something to be avoided or even feared.

You read and certainly see stuff in the media of you know, teachers taking on almost like a parent role for kids. And, you know, that's for me, like that's not in the contract [laughs]. And that shouldn't even be happening in the first place. And you hear some real horror stories of teachers losing their jobs, because of accusations. That's something that has always — that looms over all male teachers as well. (Ben: t)

Despite these concerns, Ben and other teacher participants may have already been placed in a different category by their nominating students (compared to other teachers with whom they did not share a significant relationship). The question of how they might manage these new boundaries, when the boundaries themselves could be hard to define, arose as a natural extension of the teacher discussion. Student participants (as may have been expected) had given less thought to the question of boundaries. Despite this they were quick to understand that boundary adherence represented a difficult area for teachers to navigate. “You see the horror stories of when it is gone wrong and then it just does make teachers afraid” (Vanessa: s). Earlier in the conversation Vanessa had referred to the boundary complexities between students and teachers as a “no-man’s-land” (Vanessa: s).

No-man’s-land: The balance of boundaries

Some student discussions included conversations regarding teacher boundaries and the potential for harm should such boundaries be ignored. “I guess there would be a boundary of having a relationship and being unprofessional” (Maddi: s). While Vanessa agreed with this notion, she suggested that teachers who engaged only in the basic expectations of a teaching role were unlikely to generate important connections with students. She described the space beyond basic teaching expectations (but still within the confines of safe and professional practice) as very important, offering students the opportunity to form the types of connections with teachers that were both significant and influential. She humorously referred to this area as ‘murky water’ or ‘no-man’s-land’,

suggesting it represented “a section in the middle where there's a nice balance between having boundaries, but also not just being, like, walled off” (Vanessa: s). Vanessa also acknowledged that this space may hold a perception of risk for teachers and that closer attention to boundaries may be required than with more distant student connections. Despite this, she encouraged teachers to work in this ‘middle ground’ and “not be afraid to have it in [their] sights” (Vanessa: s).

All the teacher participants in this study identified similarly with the notion of ‘no-man’s-land’, using words such as ‘grey’ ‘fuzzy’, or ‘murky’ to describe how it felt to make decisions and navigate this space with students. Alice and Molly believed in the need to share some personal aspects of themselves with their students in order to make a connection, whilst taking care not to share too much — to be “open but not too open” (Alice: t). Chelsea emphasised the difficulty of always maintaining boundaries with students.

But that means that what we occupy, as these sorts of teachers, a grey space.

But some people will say, I get too close to students. Well, it's pretty hard if I'm coaching them 10 hours a week outside of school, not to get close with them, you know, it's near on impossible — if I'm a human, right? (Chelsea: t)

Ben also accepted the struggle of managing boundaries outside of the classroom. For him this was most pronounced when working with students within school productions and also when directing community-based productions where students were also involved. In both cases, large amounts of time were spent with students in a different role to teaching. Ben said he managed these potentially blurred boundaries by always having very clear rules with his students that he would not change. “If they want to talk about something that's quite deep, I usually refer them on because that's actually not my job” (Ben: t).

It was clear that holding such professional boundaries was not always easy according to teacher participants. Chelsea said she was often left wondering if she had made the right boundary decision, reflecting that the supports within the school offer limited advice and guidance regarding those decisions. She also believed that ‘the theory’ surrounding good boundary decision making can be very different from ‘the practice’. Chelsea later conceded when reflecting upon what she called “the heavy burden of being someone’s chosen adult... I don’t know where the boundary is....” (Chelsea: t).

It's interesting, because when you go to Teachers College, they tell you about boundaries. You know, they say, never create a messenger chat without parents in it. You know, they say, if you're a male coach, and you're driving to training, and it's, you know, pissing down with rain and you pass a female player, don't pick her up. You know, they talk about those boundaries, and you nod your head and go, yeah, yeah, I wouldn't do that - I would never do that. But if you know the kid, right, the boundary blurs, and they just don't prepare you for that. (Chelsea: t)

As interviews progressed and students spoke with growing intensity around the significance of the messages they took from their teacher connections, it became clear that any such connection relied also upon high levels of safety and trust between students and teachers. The importance of safety and trust within significant student–teacher connections was another sub-theme to be defined and is considered next.

5.3.2.3 Safety and Trust.

Examples of safety and trust were evident in most participant responses. Considered critical in the formation of significant connections between students and teachers, they could perhaps be more accurately considered an outcome of appropriate attention being paid to those other themes and sub-themes previously discussed. According to participants in this study, trust and safety are extended and received through the actions and consideration of critical components such as noticing students, giving time, equitable exchanges and the importance of the spoken word.

Vaughn explained the importance of trusting in the confidentiality of his significant teacher. Vanessa similarly expressed her confidence that information would not be on-shared without her permission. For Vanessa, having had a family member previously working in the school she attended, added an extra layer of insecurity regarding where information could go if overheard by other teachers.

A lot of them aren't just teachers, they also have connections to my parents.
And so ... if I'm talking to a teacher, it's like I'm talking through a teacher to my parents, or I'm talking through a teacher to the school, to the principal...
whereas that was the first time I think I'd talked to a teacher, and was like,

actually, I'm talking to this teacher, I'm not talking to the school within this teacher — I'm talking to this teacher as a person. (Vanessa: s)

Maddi's experience of trust came in two ways. First, trusting that her teacher would only pass on what was necessary and second, trust in the reliability of the information that her teacher was telling her. In Maddi's case, she understood that there were times when her teacher was required to pass on information to keep her safe. She said that so long as this was done in a way that respected her and kept her informed, it did not endanger her trust in that teacher. "If he's ever to contact my mom, he always tells me first. 'I'm so sorry but I have to tell your mother' — so that it's not just to go home and 'surprise'..." (Maddi: s).

Honest and open practices of communication within a relationship such as this, seemed not only essential in keeping both teacher and student safe, but also in reinforcing the reliability of any further communications between the two individuals. This became especially important when the words being communicated to the student were powerful, positive and unsolicited. At these crucial times, the perceived reliability of these words was entirely dependent on the student's perception of their teacher's past honesty. Maddi was asked if she allowed herself to hear the positive messages given by her teacher of significance.

Interviewer: Does any of that... do you let any of that stuff go in?

Maddi: (s) Sometimes...

Interviewer: Given that it's from him? — from somebody else, you might just go 'yeah, yeah, yeah'?

Maddi: (s) Yeah, when it comes from him it means more, because I know he's not just saying stuff to make me feel better.

Teachers in relationships of significance with students also appeared to be able to have difficult and challenging conversations when required. The student participants interviewed commonly referred to examples of their teachers' communicating things that challenged their thoughts or behaviours at the time. They felt that the trust they had developed with that teacher allowed them to interpret messages as supportive rather than critical and so contributed to the relationship development. Aroha recalled such an occasion where her teacher had given her a message about

the time she was taking out of class. “As soon as she said that I was like, oh, yeah, I think she's right. I went straight back to class. But, um, she'll be straightforward when she needs, so yeah” (Aroha: s).

So far discussion has focussed on participants' communication of what they considered to be critical foundations to the student–teacher relationship phenomenon. The nature and landscape of the STRs, as well as their development and maintenance, seemed clearly linked to the themes and sub-themes previously discussed. With these critical components in mind, attention is now turned to consider the influence and significance that such relationships may have on the participant understandings of themselves.

5.4 Part Three: Interpretations of Significant Student–Teacher Relationships

Part three of the findings consider the interpretation and understanding that students and teachers have taken from the experiences of STRs. These findings relate to the research supporting questions Three¹⁰ and Four¹¹. The first theme under this section is entitled (iii) The Influence on Student Self-beliefs. This theme reflects upon the development of student's internal dialogue and the changes they consider relate to their experience of a significant teacher relationship. The final theme, (iv) Affective Influences on Teachers, presents the emotional implications that significant student connections may have on teachers and the teaching experience, according to the teacher participants in this study.

5.4.1 *The Influence on Student Self-Beliefs*

Students were asked to consider their self-beliefs prior to their significant teacher connection and compare them to those they held afterwards. From student responses, two sub-themes were selected. These themes are entitled Student Intrapersonal Communications and Demonstrations of New Student Beliefs and are considered next.

¹⁰ Supporting Question Three: What influence does the student–teacher relationship have on a student's experience of themselves – i.e. their self-value, self-belief, and wellbeing?

¹¹ Supporting Question Four: How do significant student–teacher relationships influence teacher experiences of their role and how are these reconciled within their practice?

5.4.1.1 Student Intrapersonal Communications.

As students began to consider their self-beliefs prior to and post their experience of significant teacher connections, an awareness grew that important changes to these belief structures had taken place. In order to explore these internal beliefs, students were asked to construct a diagram during their focus group meeting, depicting those self-beliefs they recalled holding before and then again after the time of their significant teacher experience. They were then asked to explain the meaning and significance of what they had drawn.

5.4.1.2 Beliefs Held Prior to Significant Teacher Connection.

Student participants responded with a high degree of congruence when recalling the types of beliefs and internal conversations that commonly populated their historical thinking patterns. Notions of insecurity and self-doubt were prominent themes depending on circumstances, family and other influences operating at the time. Though clearly subjective, all students were asked to do their best to present only those self-views and attitudes they remember experiencing directly prior to the time of their significant teacher connection, rather than other more historical beliefs, potentially relating to earlier periods in their lives. Vaughn typified other responses when saying “if I hadn't met her, I really, I don't think I would have been at school. I reckon I would have — would have down a different path” (Vaughn: s).

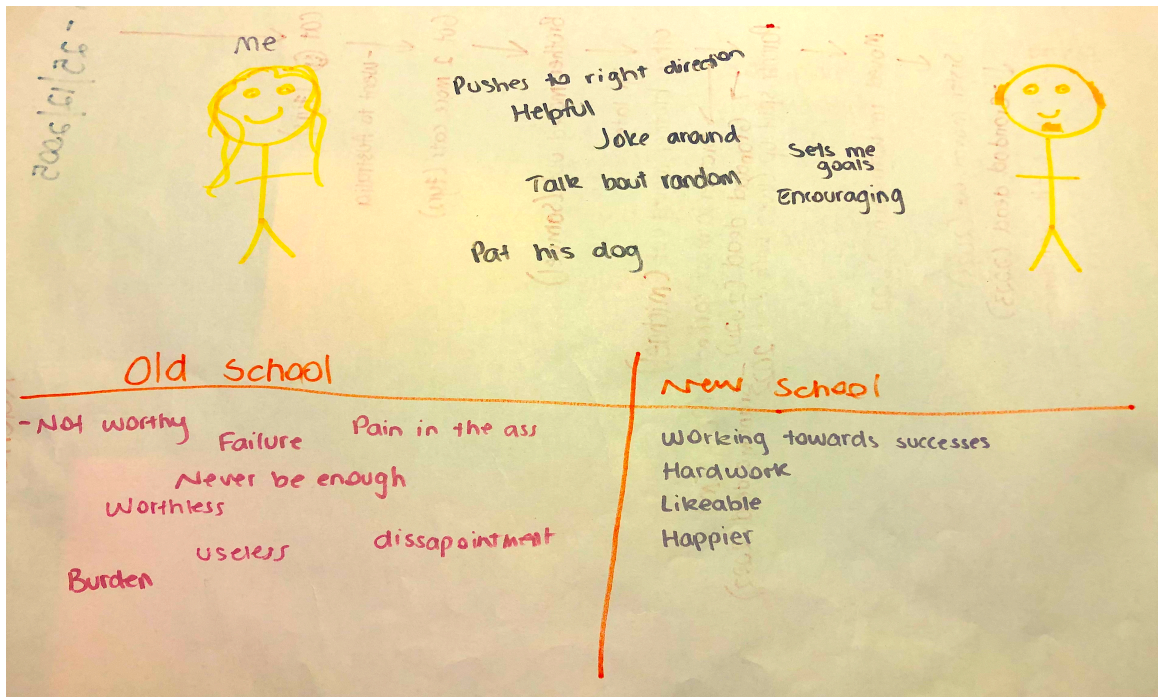
Casey recalled managing well within the primary school system but that this confidence changed once he began secondary school. He quickly learned it was safer not to try. “I'd always say 'I'm going to fail this' so then I wouldn't actually be disappointed after the outcome” (Casey: s). Despite having very supportive parents and a settled and safe home-life, Casey acknowledged the growth in his negative thoughts at this time. This included his not feeling of value to anyone, not being special, having no real connections with anyone and wanting to leave school. “I think it was just the waste. I felt like it was a waste of time. I felt like I could get more out of it [if I was to] like go home” (Casey: s).

Aroha remembered life being difficult as she grew up and recalled circumstances that included her family's poor financial position, as well as her own personal struggles with issues such as body image and anxiety. She considered going to school and looking towards positive future outcomes a low priority. She also remembered constantly moving households, living with different family

members and being convinced that she would never get out of the small town she was in, let alone go to university. “I felt useless, couldn't get out of bed. Didn't want to do anything, felt like a failure” (Aroha: s). Her decision to move to another school was a final attempt at bringing about a different educational outcome and Aroha's focus group drawings depicted historical beliefs such as ‘useless’, ‘disgusting’, ‘worthless’ and ‘horrid’ (Aroha: s). Vaughn also remembers experiencing negative self-messaging at the time prior to his significant teacher connection. His decline in confidence and self-belief once he transitioned into the high school environment made the first of these years difficult. He recalled a range of negative self-messaging at that time and explained “I didn't exactly believe in myself, as much as I didn't go to the limits I could go to, always under-estimating myself” (Vaughn: s).

When it came time for Maddi to talk about those things she believed about herself prior to her significant teacher connection, she chose to write these words down and allow them to be read by the researcher. These negative self-talk messages clearly still held a degree of difficulty to verbally express and while she no longer felt the same way about herself, she also said she did not want to focus on the negativity of these old thoughts. The words Maddi used to describe her historical beliefs (seen in Figure 5 below) included ‘failure’, ‘not worthy’, ‘burden’, ‘useless’, ‘disappointment’ and ‘never be enough’ (Maddi: s).

Figure 5 'Old vs New Beliefs'



Note. Maddi's drawing showing her historical versus recent self-beliefs, used with her permission.

Common perceptions amongst student participants prior to their significant teacher connections included feelings of low self-worth, disconnection, loneliness and the idea that doors were closed or that futures had already been defined and were not changeable. In all cases, students reported that a different set of beliefs now replaced their historically negative self-views. While not all beliefs (or changes to them) should be attributed to their STR, student participants were confident that the ones they reported (in their view at least) were directly related to this association.

5.4.1.3 Beliefs Held After Significant Teacher Connection.

The data from this line of inquiry allowed students to examine their strengths and compare old and new self-beliefs around the time of forming their STRs. Students enjoyed talking about these changes and expressed that the opportunity to reflect on them in this way was valuable. Casey was clear regarding the impact of his significant teacher connection on his school trajectory.

But then I had her last year and it just changed — like her way of teaching and my way of learning just, we're perfect for each other, and it just, yeah, made me want to be at school and do well. (Casey: s)

This influence extended outside of his academic success however as Casey attempted to explain how his teacher connection had influenced the way he felt about himself as a person.

I think it's just like, because I didn't really have any people in my life in like the early years, that actually cared about anything — I had my parents and that, but like, when she came along, it was like, she'd actually care about how I felt and how I was doing outside of school... She actually cared about not just my work, but everything else going on. It just made me feel better about myself. (Casey: s)

Aroha used the terms 'safe' and 'calm' to describe how her mind worked since her significant teacher connection. She explained "whenever I'm talking to her and stuff, I just feel like I can actually just breathe, which is rare for me with like, the mental health and stuff [referring to her history of anxiety]" (Aroha: s). While Aroha acknowledged that the improved culture of student-teacher care within the school had been beneficial, she attributed the reduction in her anxiety to the personal experience of her significant teacher connection. Aroha took time to explain the value of the academic opportunities offered through her teacher's support, however emphasised that the paralleled sense of safety and freedom from anxiety was something she experienced as having wider value beyond school and academic success. "It's — I don't know if that's the right word, but it's like I have that resilience. Yeah, like the resilience the emotional knowledge, as well as the actual like, intelligence book smart stuff" (Aroha: s).

According to the student participants in this study, it was often the spoken words, or actions taken in a moment of need, that changed a student's view of themselves. Vaughn was asked to expand on the impact of words spoken by his significant teacher.

Interviewer: But what are the feelings that go with that new belief?

Vaughn: (s) I'd probably say I'm a changed man from that day on...I felt like I had sort of wasted so much time doubting myself. It took one person to believe in me and then one mark and it

completely changed, and my world had changed just from
her saying a couple of words ... all I needed was one
person who meant something to me to actually say that ...

While Maddi's positive self-view statements of 'likeable', 'happier' and 'encouraged' were more conservative than other students, they were no less remarkable given her past negative internal messaging. Admitting her struggle of altering early thinking habits, Maddi said she was still very much in the process of change, adding "well ... I want to be happy ... because I'm still not there. Better than I was but still have a lot of rough patches" (Maddi: s). She suggested that the messages from her teacher at times offered a sole challenging voice to harmful statements from the past.

Other student participants found it easier to consider differences to their changing self-belief structure through a lens of their more public achievements. New student beliefs that were both visible and observable to others represent the next area to be explored.

5.4.1.4 Demonstrations of New Student Beliefs.

Student participants in this study all linked changes to their self-belief structures at the time of their significant teacher experience to positive changes in the way they presented to the world and the things they were able to achieve. "I went from having me barely passing level one, just scraped by, to getting excellence endorsed last year and [an] excellence academic award overall" (Aroha: s). Students reported improvements in mood, resilience and perception of their potential. "It made me more positive, made me put more effort in, even it was noticed at work" (Vaughn: s). External demonstrations of these changes were also experienced by students in the form of things such as academic achievement, confidence or school attendance.

Maddi spoke of her accomplishments as proof of the changes she had been able to make to her thinking as a result of the formation of her STR.

I never used to do anything at school, and I didn't used to plan anything for the future, but now I've passed level one, two and three, and looking at courses for next year. And [her significant teacher] helped a lot with that. (Maddi: s)

Vanessa suggested that one of the most immediate influences of her significant teacher experience had been to her confidence. She reflected that during this time, she had developed an

increased sense of self-value and felt greater personal safety. She believed that this increased confidence had greatly improved her capacity to speak assertively with other adults. Vanessa admitted that while not sounding like something of great significance, her growth in confidence had led to her successfully applying for opportunities in the community and contributed to her sense of personal identity and success.

Then that confidence is spread into my other classes with other teachers that I may not just have that confidence with in the first place... Yeah, and then other parts of your life. Like for me, outside of that was [community] council and stuff like that that I've done. (Vanessa: s)

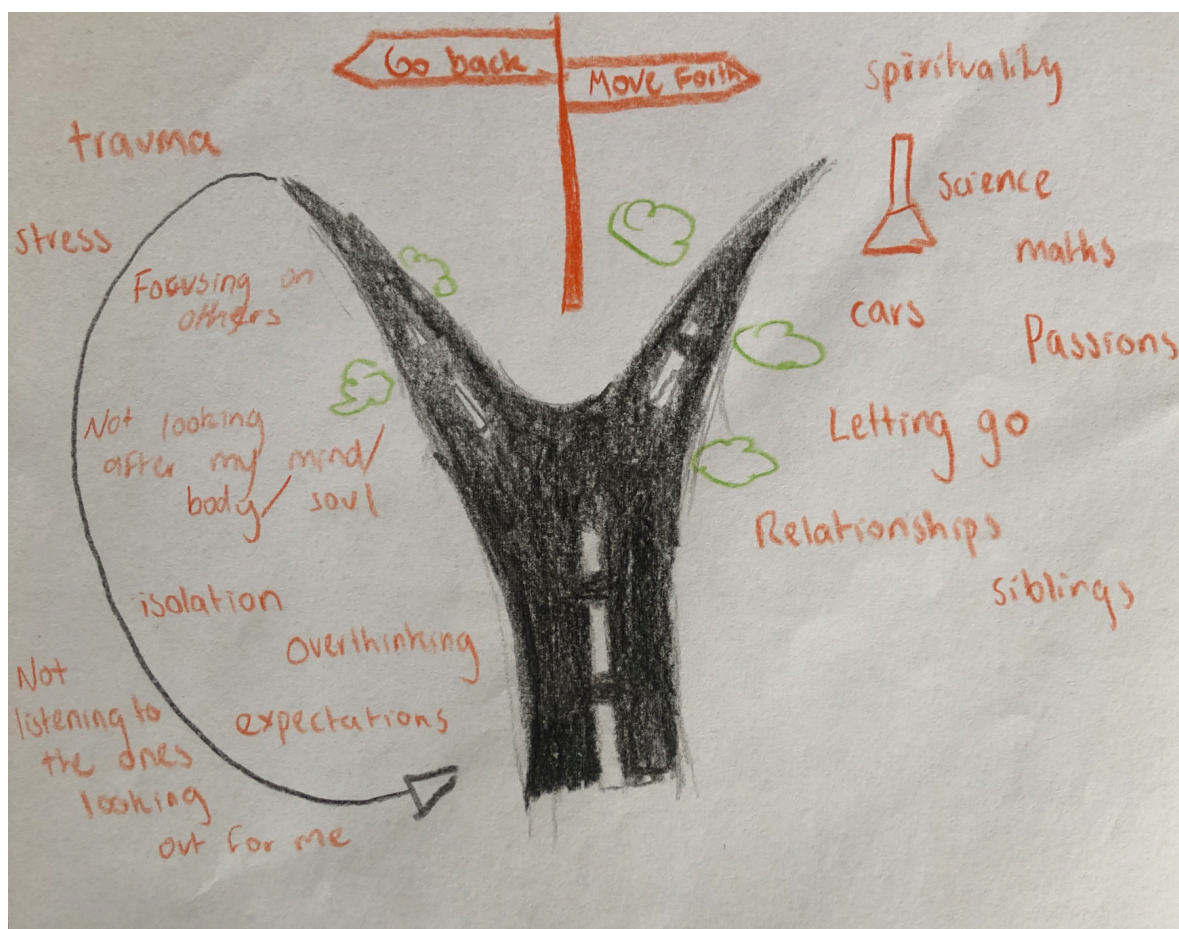
Aroha's most immediate and significant teacher-related outcomes had been to her own mood, self-perception and hopes for the future.

You learn new perspectives and come up with stuff that you never thought you could do. And that like really pushes the potential as well, which was like me, for the grades. And then I also gained like a higher self-worth, because I never thought I could do what I'm doing now. And she really pushed me to be able to be where I am ... And 'I'm proud to be able to look at myself in the mirror now and not feel like that failure as before ... (Aroha: s)

Aroha's emotional and academic successes appear to have contributed towards an improved sense of self-worth, allowing her to access future opportunities (university) she had always thought were closed to her. "Being able to go on that scholarship I talked to you about as well, to university this year was pretty good. I couldn't have done it without her, so she completely flipped everything for me in a way" (Aroha: s).

Like other students in this study, Aroha struggled to fully explain the changes to her life as a result of the relationship she was able to develop with her teacher. In attempting to do so, she constructed a drawing showing the intersection of two roads (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 'Two Roads'



Note. Aroha's focus group drawing showing 'two roads' representing different possible life outcomes, used with her permission.

Aroha explained that within her drawing, one road symbolised the life she believed she was destined for prior to meeting her significant teacher. The other road she believed represented the life she experiences currently. For Aroha, the intersection or fork in this road clearly coincides with the beginning of her significant teacher connection.

Not all of the changes discussed by students were able to be seen by others and a number of students spoke of the less obvious influences of their newly held beliefs on their future hopes and aspirations.

5.4.1.5 Future Influence.

As students turned their attention towards the influences that new self-belief structures had on their future, a variety of responses were reported. Aroha referred to the degree of mastery she now felt around the direction her own life was taking. Her once quite debilitating levels of anxiety, and fears of not being able to escape the social circle she was raised in, were now replaced by a level of confidence that she attributed to her significant teacher experience. When asked how she might manage the transition away from school and her teacher and how that might influence her feelings of safety, she responded in the following way:

I don't think I'll need to anymore. Well, by the end, I don't think I'll need to manage it because, like the safe thing, like her being my safe space. It's like, I mean, I already know that I don't need her to be my safe space as much as last year, as I did then. So, I think she really has just taught me a lot of lessons and stuff, so I think that I won't need her as my safe space anymore - if that makes sense? (Aroha: s)

Vaughn and Charlotte both considered their new self-beliefs to be equipping them for futures they now felt were attainable. For Charlotte this included the desire to see her success model similar outcomes for her children when that time came.

Both my parents they dropped out in Year 9, and dad got kicked out at Year 10, so it's kind of like — I don't want to be like them. I want to do better in a way, or if I ever have children, so they know that I did try. (Charlotte: s)

Maddi's last response regarding the future relevance of her student-teacher relationship was powerful, as much from her demeanour and tone, as the words she used. During her interview process it was clear that Maddi was both careful and measured in the responses she gave and not given to over-statement or grandiose descriptions. Maddi had just finished explaining her teacher's involvement in her mental health safety plan [following her historic episodes of self-harm] when she was asked how significant this involvement had been to her.

[naming her teacher] was the only teacher I felt I could trust so I talked to him about it and then ever since then he's just took me under his wing and helped me a lot... I would not be here if it wasn't for him. Maddi: (s)

It was clear to the interviewer that Maddi believed she would have taken her own life already, if not for her significant teacher connection. This was not the first time Maddi had referenced the absence of a future if it were not for her teacher's input in her life, but it was the most transparent and confronting of the accounts she gave.

To this point, findings have focussed on the descriptions of significant student–teacher connections and how these relationships have influenced the experiences of the participants within them, particularly the student participants. Holding these notions in mind, attention is now turned towards how teacher participants have experienced the affective or emotional influences connected to the STR. While clearly not all demands placed on teachers significantly connecting with their students are 'affective' in nature (i.e. some may relate to the expenditure of time), it was the affective implications which participants in this study expressed as exerting the most influence on them personally and professionally. The affective influences and 'emotional work' (Edgington, 2016; Tuxford & Bradley, 2014) of teachers engaged in significant relationships with their students are considered next.

5.4.2 *Affective Influences on Teachers*

The final theme entitled Affective Influences on Teachers is explored alongside the four related sub-themes of The Emotional Work Required of Teachers within STRS; Sustaining Teachers Within Relationships; Challenges of Student Relationships on Teachers — The Iceberg; and Finding a Balance.

5.4.2.1 The Emotional Work Required of Teachers Within STRs.

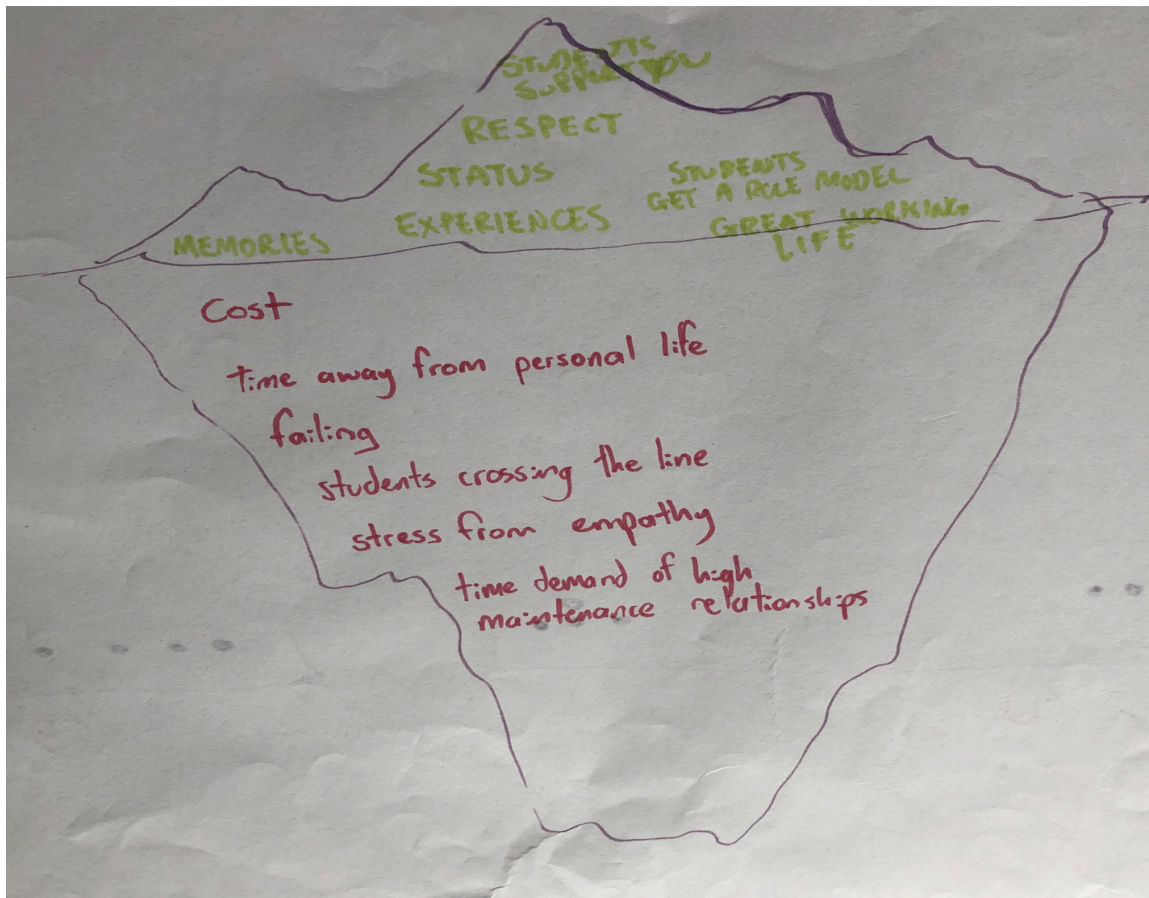
The first of these sub-themes to be discussed represents findings from the teacher focus group meeting and is concerned with the notion that teachers maintaining significant connections with their students requires an exchange of energy. "Just the time that it takes for sure, the energy and also the emotional energy. And I think you can't really quantify that" (Chelsea: t). The notion that engagement in STRs by teachers required the expenditure of additional teacher energy was supported by all teacher participants in this study. Within the focus group interview, teachers used metaphorical ways of describing STRs and explored aspects which they considered both sustained and challenged these connections. Some described their connections with students as an "emotional roller coaster", "it fills the soul and the heart — bigtime" (Alice: t), others referred to a "cup"

(Chelsea: t) that could be filled or drained. Whichever way teacher participants chose to describe their experience, a consensus was reached that there *were* impacts on teachers in developing significant student–teacher relationships. According to the teachers interviewed, some influences were considered to be positive and encouraged them to maintain student connections, while others left them feeling depleted and questioning the sustainability of teaching in this way. Those aspects teachers said acted to support or promote relationships of significance are considered next.

5.4.2.2 Sustaining Teachers Within Relationships.

As part of this discussion, Ben drew a picture of an iceberg (see Figure 7) as a way of describing his understanding of being a teacher within a significant student–teacher relationship.

Figure 7 'The Iceberg'



Note. Ben's focus group drawing of 'The Iceberg', showing what he considered to be the teacher costs versus benefits of maintaining significant student connections, used with his permission.

“I went with the iceberg — what you see versus what is actually happening behind the scenes” (Ben: t). The top of Ben’s iceberg (being the part that was visible to others) represented the positive and supportive mechanisms that came from significant student relationships. These mechanisms greatly improved his experience and enjoyment of teaching and encouraged him to continue. Ben believed that because he had “put the work in with relationships, [*this*] meant that students knew about me before they met me, which means they already came in with a positive feel about my class” (Ben: t). In this way, Ben focused on the benefits to his classroom management and improving his teaching experience. Having the respect and support of the students he taught was important to Ben and he considered these things improved when he also put time into making his student relationships significant. “Yeah, the students get a role model — someone that they can look up to, and you get a great working life” (Ben: t).

Alice talked about an internal sense of pride which she connected with her understanding of who she was as a person and why she had chosen teaching as a profession. “You’re proud of the student, you’re proud of yourself, you’re proud of your colleagues. Makes you feel like you’re making a difference. It validates and reinforces the job that you’re doing and probably some of your life choices” (Alice: t). Chelsea and Molly also talked about their sense of accomplishment and the idea that as teachers, they were making a difference. Chelsea spoke specifically about the impact of seeing a student develop and grow outside of academic achievement and the classroom.

I think being able to see, particularly if you’ve had relationships with the kid over the years, being able to see them change and grow as you’ve connected with them, is I just think, one of the coolest things about teaching. ... I think that goes way past the classroom, way past the learning part — it’s got to be that for me. (Chelsea: t)

As Chelsea reflected, she quickly linked the most sustaining aspects of student connections to what she considered to be more hidden costs.

I think the worst part is the burden that comes with being ‘their person’. You know ... if I know that there’s no one else at school that they would reach out to, then when they reach out to me, I have to ... you know? (Chelsea: t)

5.4.2.3 Challenges of Student Relationships on Teachers — ‘The Iceberg’.

According to Ben’s metaphorical iceberg, unseen challenges associated with maintaining significant student connections existed ‘below the water level’ for teachers, in disproportionately greater numbers to those of the more positive and sustaining experiences. He explained that these challenges existed in the form of imbalances between his personal and professional life, as well as from the perceived pressure to closely monitor student–teacher boundaries. “You get sometimes, students trying to cross that line, and they go a bit too far. Because they don’t know where that gap is. Because you haven’t built the bridge clearly enough for them” (Ben: t). Ben also experienced the stress of not always being able to change the circumstances of students with whom he felt closely connected to. He reflected “if you’re an empathetic person like me, you feel that as well” (Ben: t). All teacher participants connected (whether using Ben’s iceberg or a metaphor of their own) to the notion that significant student relationships carried with them an ‘unseen cost’ for teachers.

Chelsea spoke at length about the student who had identified her as significant. This student was not someone she would have predicted to have developed such a meaningful relationship with, or who she would have noticed for other issues such as attendance or academic performance. “She’s not a high-flyer, so she sits in that middle group where I wouldn’t normally have a tonne of contact with those kids” (Chelsea: t). This raised the concern for Chelsea of the difficulty in identifying those students who may need to develop these types of relationships with teachers.

Chelsea: (t) I think it just shows the impact that you can have, even when you don’t really fully realise it. And even those kids on the outskirts like, like her, they just want to be seen, you know, she’s sort of drowning in this issue at home and doesn’t really have adults who are advocating for her. I feel really proud of that — her feeling that way about me.

Interviewer: At the same time sad, in that this might be her experience in the world at the moment?

Chelsea: (t) Absolutely. Or that, what little time I actually spent with her made such a vast impact on her — that’s incredible [said with tears — sadness].

Both Molly and Chelsea noticed the increased demands on their time that significant student relationship development took. Molly spoke of the impact to her health, especially at the end of the term, when her time and energy to spend with her own family was most depleted. “It’s a front you put up that you look like you are holding it all together — but underneath ...” (Molly: t). Chelsea was particularly mindful of the emotional toll it took in making herself available and caring so deeply for her students.

When you care so deeply about someone and they come to you with their issues, you take that on board, like you [Ben] were saying about being empathetic. But that often does mean that when you go home, your cup is a bit empty, you know. If you’ve got a family at home, and I sometimes feel like I’m walking in a zombie a wee bit, and definitely less time for teaching and admin ... you can’t do everything — like that’s a really harsh reality, but it means something’s got to give. (Chelsea: t)

Alice considered the emotional load of forming connections of significance with students to be draining and time consuming, particularly where students appeared vulnerable. She also noticed her own self-doubt.

Did I say too much? Am I being too much of a crutch for them to get through this, or am I not doing enough? You run out of time when you’re dealing with all the emotional stuff. A kid turns up to your class in a non-contact upset, you’re not going to be like ‘no go away, I’m doing reports’, you’re going to connect with them and try and spend time with them ... (Alice: t)

All of the teachers in this study spoke in detail of the challenges of maintaining close and caring relationships with students. These included anxiety, self-doubt, poor health habits and the constant conflict between the time available to them and their perception of disappointing people in need. These people included students, family and at times themselves. Discussion often centred around the question of health and fairness and the balance between those things that nourished or depleted teachers’ resources.

5.4.2.4 The Balance.

During both individual and focus group teacher interviews, conversation often returned to notions around teacher self-care, the wider demands of the role and managing energy expenditure. All teacher participants agreed that the benefits and costs of maintaining significant student–teacher relationships were not balanced and referred back either to Ben’s metaphorical iceberg, or a metaphor of their own, to help communicate the degree of imbalance. From further discussion, it appeared each of the teachers had their own mechanisms to manage the demands of their significant connections with students, even if these strategies offered only a temporary solution and the gap between energy expenditure and energy resource remained.

Ben reflected on his ability to detach himself from the emotional demands of maintaining significant connections with students. He noticed that, despite his close attention to boundaries and attempts to keep distant from students he was working with, the demands of maintaining significant relationships with students he cared about were unavoidable.

I actually like, I do get quite down. When I think about that, that's what kids are going through. It's not, I would say, I've passed them on and go 'phew.' Yeah, it's actually stays with me for a while. (Ben: t)

The notion of accruing worries or concerns around students, the energy demands that this required and the lack of opportunity for teachers to process these emotions, were sentiments shared by all teacher participants. While Molly considered the notion of burnout as being related to teacher workload, she also connected it with the demand of maintaining significant relationships with her students.

Burnout is real and sicknesses is real, so whenever I come to a school holiday or a long weekend, I get sick. And it's just because it's constant, go, go, go, as soon as you take the foot of the pedal, yeah that's when it occurs. So yeah, burnout to me is a negative. The really great teachers get burnt out — you can only do so much. (Molly: t)

Chelsea reflected with some sadness on her experience of the powerless position some teenagers found themselves in. “I think teenagers are in such a volatile position in the world”

(Chelsea: *t*). She believed that caring for students at this time in their life could be highly demanding, especially when some students appeared to have an endless need for that care.

Chelsea: (*t*) Gosh — caring about people is risky. In some ways.

Interviewer: Tell me more about that ...

Chelsea: (*t*) It's just it's like an ever ... it's like a string that doesn't end, do you know, like ... I, personally, really, this is something I'm working on myself because I just pour myself into everything, but at the end I'm empty. So I'm like, literally this term just trying to look after myself, because I — I'm just so burnt out. And I don't have anything left when I get home, you know, for my kids, and I'm like, I have to figure out a way to do this job and be healthy and mentally healthy and physically healthy, or I can't do it anymore.

All teacher participants in this study conceded the difficulty of quantifying the impact of STRs. They also acknowledged the complexity in separating those influences related to student relationship development from the wider demands of the teaching role. Despite participant interviews being intentionally conducted in the first term of the school year to reduce stress related to teaching calendar workload requirements, three of the four teachers in this study said that they were considering leaving the profession due to exhaustion and an inability to sustain their current teaching practices. “People getting burnt out and stuff like that. ... I'm just, I'm just not here for it” (Chelsea: *t*). The fourth teacher (Alice) had already chosen to work four days a week as a way of taking care of herself and being able to continue her teaching career.

With these themes and sub-themes identified from participant responses, the next chapter looks to discuss them in light of existing theory and literature. Expanding on the support and limitations of this work, potential gaps in current thinking can be highlighted alongside the implication of this study in the broader field of educational research.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

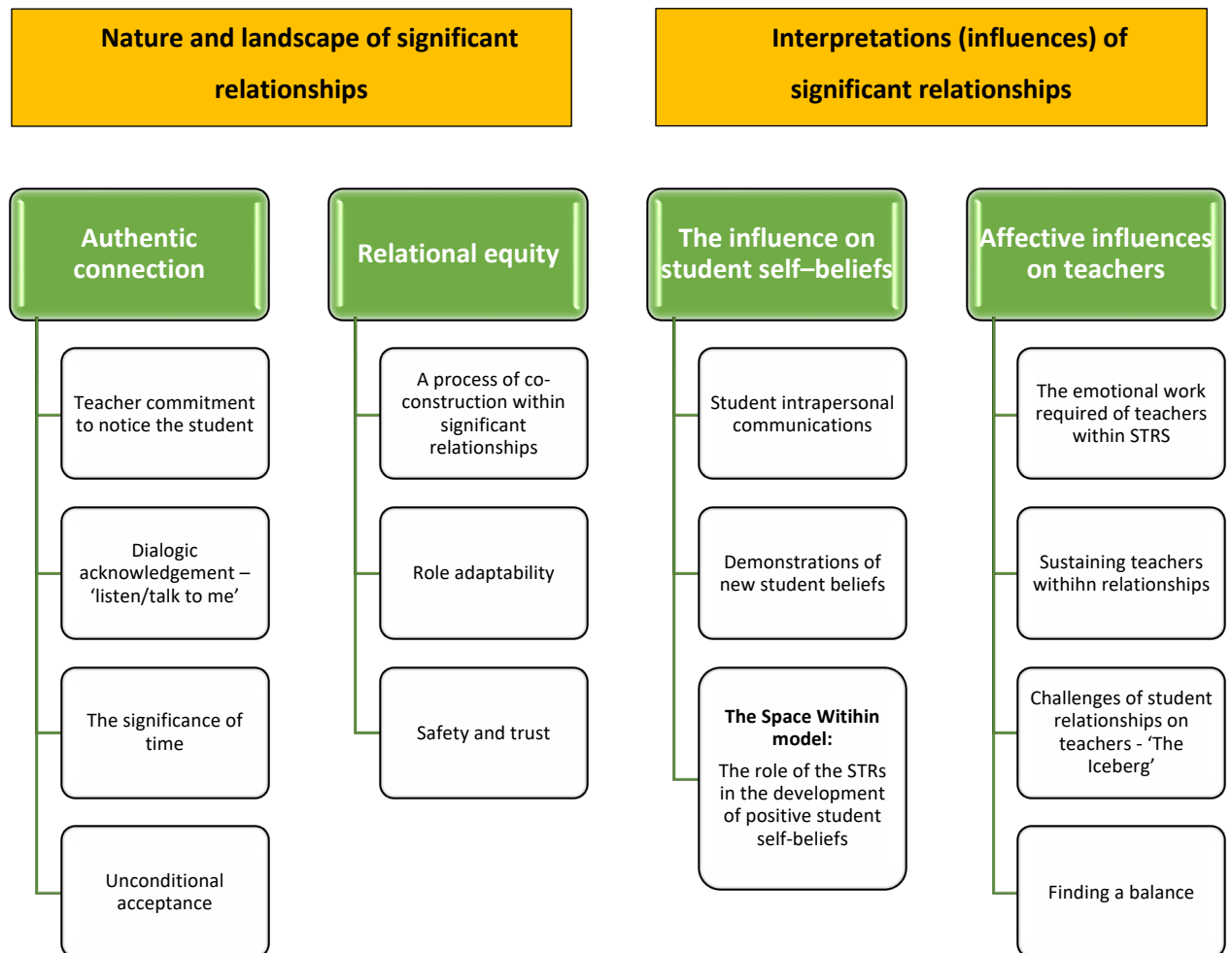
The previous chapter presented themes identified from the lived experiences of six Year 13 students and four secondary school teachers as they navigated the significant and influential student–teacher relationships (STRs) they were part of. In response to the research question ‘what are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?’, the previous chapter presented the findings in two parts. First it explored and described the lived experiences of students and teachers forming such connections, giving insight and understanding into critical components of significant student–teacher relationships. The next set of findings revealed the influences and understandings made by participants of their significant connections. The presentation of this data sought to uncover what Creely et al. (2021) calls ‘the heart of phenomenology’ by making “meaning from personal experience” (p. xvii).

6.1.1 *Structure of the Chapter*

The following chapter is structured to present two overarching constructs. The first, entitled Part One: Nature and Landscape of Significant Relationships, considers the essential components of connections between student and teacher and their fundamental place in describing the STR. Under this section, the themes of Authentic Connection and Relational Equity (along with the associated sub-themes) developed in the previous chapter, are discussed in light of the literature so that interpretations may be challenged, affirmed or extended (Lindsay, 2006). The second overarching construct to be discussed is Part Two: Interpretations of Significant Relationships. It responds to the latter part of the research question concerned with participant interpretation and understanding of their STR. Within this section, the two themes of The Influence on Student Self-beliefs and Affective Influence on Teachers (along with their associated sub-themes) are discussed. During the discussion surrounding the influence of STRs on student self-beliefs, The Space Within model is presented as one possible explanation of how STRs may influence the development of self-beliefs in students.

Figure. 8 below, shows the overarching constructs (relating to the research question) and how they connect to the themes and sub-themes identified in the research findings.

Figure 8 *Overarching Constructs, Themes and Sub-themes of the Study*



Note. Overarching constructs are represented in yellow boxes, with green and clear boxes relating to themes and sub-themes identified in the study's findings.

As part of this discussion chapter, the meaning and implications of participant experiences are able to be considered, stories constructed and re-constructed to allow both the researcher's voice to be heard and also allow the reader the opportunity to reflect on their own experience (van Manen, 2017). This discussion begins by considering how participants have described the nature and landscape of their STR.

6.2 Part One: Nature and Landscape of Significant Student–Teacher Relationships

When participants in this study were asked to describe the STRs they had experienced, their responses spoke of the primary importance of a connection. Describing it as “one of the most

important things to have” (Aroha: s), Aroha’s belief was representative of other participant responses. The idea that connection sits centrally to any significant relationships was one supported by teachers as well, with Chelsea stating “all kids needed connection” (Chelsea: t). Felten and Lambert (2020) reinforced the importance of connection when imploring their readers “to place relationships at the centre of undergraduate education for all students” (p. 1). In a similar way, Schwartz (2023) considered the capacity for teachers to connect with their students to be one of the most essential elements of the teaching endeavour. The importance of students forming connections with teachers was woven throughout participant responses in this study and there were many examples of both students and teachers attesting to the centrality of this theme.

Students gave examples of relationships based on strong, individual connections with their teachers of significance. The need for individuals to form such connections with one another is well supported by a range of literature. The early work of Maslow (1943) placed the human need to form such connections within his theory of human motivation. He suggested it related to the third level within his theory, entitled ‘love and belonging’. According to Maslow, this level included such human needs as social connection, belonging, friendship and familial associations. Many authors (Boston-Leary et al., 2024; Dar & Sakthivel, 2022; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; Trivedi & Mehta, 2019) have expanded on Maslow’s theory including Rojas et al. (2023), who advocated a more “integrated view of human beings and of their needs, as well as for following a balanced strategy in their satisfaction” (p. 1).

With this research using the context of student and teacher connections, notions surrounding attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) may also help explain participant need for connection within relationship. Considered an important part of the psychological attachment process with caregivers, attachment constructs include a child’s desire to seek both a ‘safe haven’ in times of distress and a ‘secure base’ from which they might explore the world. While it was not the premise of this study to explore the parental attachment experiences of participants, these caregiving roles (usually provided by parents in early childhood) are believed to become more reciprocal in nature during adolescence (Kerns et al., 2015) and may represent more closely the teacher role, in caring student–teacher relationships.

Student participants in this study were clear that their experiences of authenticity from teachers were highly predictive of the significant connections they had formed with that teacher. Participant

responses surrounding teacher authenticity and its impact on relationship development are considered next.

6.2.1 Authentic Connection

Participants believed authentic connections were essential between students and teachers if their resulting relationship was to be considered significant or influential to the student. Findings suggested that the perceived authenticity of the teacher was also strongly linked to the student's experience of care from them. Responses from Aroha, Casey and Maddi showed that teacher authenticity was demonstrated in a number of ways which included students being personally noticed as individuals, listened to and spoken with by teachers, being given time to access their teachers and also through students experiencing their teachers as unconditionally accepting. These participant experiences align well to those found by Johnson and LaBelle (2017) who identified approachability, passion and attentiveness as some of the important contributors to authentic teaching approaches as observed by U.S. university students.

McHugh et al. (2012) alongside others such as Noddings (2013), distinguished a difference between authentic and aesthetic care within education. They considered aesthetic care as being based on "sentimental phrases with little to no action, and authentic care [to include] actions that incorporate genuine consideration of the person being cared for and their capacities" (McHugh et al., 2012, p. 11). Kahn (2017) also emphasised the importance of authenticity in working relationships when urging those in positions of power to be "authentic, present, and intellectually and emotionally available" (p. 190). Here he connected the notion of authenticity with 'being present' in the relationship and suggested that personal engagement took place only when meaningful connections were made with others.

Students taking part in this study unanimously connected with the importance of being known and noticed by their significant teachers. The teacher's ability to physically and emotionally perceive the student (and their needs) appeared to be a critical component of teacher authenticity and formational to the development of the STR. Edwards (2021) took the idea of teacher perception a step further, suggesting that "when students are invisible in the classroom, they feel powerless" (p. 64). In this way, being authentically noticed by the teacher linked to other notions of agency and power as children sought to be seen and heard (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Whitehead et al., 2022). The first sub-theme of Teacher Commitment to Notice the Student is explored next.

6.2.1.1 Teacher Commitment to Notice the Student.

One of the very first and most persuasive reflections from student participants looking to explain their experience of significant and influential teacher connection surrounded the importance of being noticed by their teachers. Aroha referred to being “actually noticed” (Aroha: s) and Maddi reflected that she was “always noticed” (Maddi: s) when it came to her significant teacher experience. For Casey, the experience of being personally noticed as an individual, and validated as such, appeared to advance an understanding of his own significance and value in the world — “I am an actual person” (Casey: s). Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016) described “the importance of being recognised and validated as a person” (p. 10) as a key assumption when teachers were seeking to work relationally with students in the classroom. This type of teacher recognition goes beyond the simple differentiation of student identity.

By their very presence in class, teachers perceive students every day and communicate the fact that they have done so, in a way that most students are aware of. A teacher may say for instance, “excuse me Tane, can you just focus your attention back on me while I explain this next step — thank you”. This type of exchange is common between teachers and students and certainly indicates that the student has been seen by their teacher and that their presence in the room has been noticed. While there is nothing wrong with these types of observations by teachers in terms of their classroom management techniques, it is clearly not what students in this study were referring to when they spoke of ‘being noticed’ by their teacher in ways that contributed towards the development of their significant relationship. The development of these types of significant student–teacher connections, according to Bury and Masuzawa (2018) and Reeve (2015), are unlikely when teacher interactions are one directional, hierarchical or where the needs of the teacher are the sole stimulus for the exchange.

For students in this research project, the connection between their self-esteem and an experience of being noticed by their teacher in a way that held value for the student, seemed related. Such connections were similarly well supported through the work of Ligestad et al. (2019) and Ricoeur (2005) who linked this type of recognition with the development of self-esteem. Maddi and Aroha recalled examples of their significant teachers noticing their demeanour and mood and engaging them in conversations which they interpreted as an extension of genuine care. For Aroha, this was something she felt was important and contributed to her growing sense of personal value outside of academic achievements.

Student participants seemed to differentiate between being seen by their teacher for purposes decided upon by the teacher (i.e. recording absences) and their experience of more genuine recognition. In the latter case, teacher motivation appeared to have been displaced and the needs of the student were positioned at the centre. Noddings (2013) called this extension of teacher care 'motivational displacement'. She linked the ability for the teacher to put aside their agenda and motivations in favour of those of the student as an essential element in the formation of caring relationships. For the student participants in this study, experiencing teachers "apprehending the other's reality" (Noddings, 2013, p. 15) was not only important but foundational to developing a significant and influential relational space between them and their teacher. According to student participants, these experiences carried with them a sense that care had been extended and then received. Maddi reflected that the example of being noticed and offered help by her significant teacher "just makes me feel like — cared for... reminds me a lot that I'm worth more than I think, and that I do have potential" (Maddi: s).

Many of the authentic components of student–teacher relationships of significance, such as being noticed in the way described above, occur concurrently with other important characteristics of these types of connections. In the process of a student being "actually noticed" (Aroha: s) for example, opportunities often present themselves for dialogue to begin between students and teachers. According to participants, being acknowledged through dialogue offered a powerful tool for relational development. The process of being listened to and conversed with in meaningful ways is considered next.

6.2.1.2 Dialogic Acknowledgement: 'Listen to Me, Talk to Me'.

One of the important findings presented by student participants in this study was the value placed on dialogue between themselves and their significant teachers. Vaughn was emphatic when stating that simply through his teacher's belief in him, his "world had changed" (Vaughn: s). While Aroha was able to recall verbatim her teacher's words of encouragement and linked this directly to the growth of her own self-belief and the decision to engage in a university programme she previously would not have considered. Other student responses suggested that the messages conveyed within their significant teacher's dialogue were often internalised as trustworthy and reliable external sources of information. As such, they had the power to alter student perceptions and motivate positive, and in some cases, observable outcomes. These student responses contribute to growing evidence across a range of research fields including medicine and rehabilitation (Stewart

& Loftus, 2018), sports performance (Sahli et al., 2020) and education (Bishop, 2019; Denton, 2008), which supports the power of teacher dialogue in the development of significant STRs. Teacher messages were also used by students in this study to build positive self-belief and lift students' overall sense of confidence and resiliency.

Those students interviewed also suggested that the power of exchanges between themselves and their teachers extended beyond the spoken word, through the process of listening. "Just by talking to us throughout the day and actually listening, I reckon that's probably the biggest thing, is listening to what your students have to say" (Vaughn: s). Nichols and Straus (2021) suggest that "few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood ... that our feelings are recognized and ultimately, that what we have to say matters" (p. 9). The importance of students feeling listened to by their teachers was an essential feature of the STR experience.

Student participants also remarked upon the value of being afforded space and time to access their teacher of significance and that it was not always the spoken interaction which held value for them. Denton (2008) supports such experiences when suggesting that the "skilful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skilful use of words" (p. 31) in maintaining relationships. The reliance on non-verbal cues, such as tone, facial expression and eye contact, are sometimes said to be even more reliable than the spoken words or verbal cues, as they "reveal the intention of the sender of the information" (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017, p. 51). Non-verbal exchanges that occur between teachers and students within a significant relationship both rely on and build authenticity in connection and are another way in which students feel noticed and valued according to students in this study.

Vaughn's example of being 'believed in' relied concurrently on high levels of student-teacher trust developed over time. The notion that a teacher's investment of time, influences the degree to which they are trusted by students is not new, with the Australian Education Research Organisation (2023) encouraging teachers to "invest more time to build connections and show they are trustworthy" (para. 5). Likewise, in their past online resource, *Putting Student Relationships First* (Ministry of Education, 2017), the New Zealand Ministry of Education also promoted the importance of investing time in student-teacher connections. They suggested teachers needed to "take the time to know them [students] and build connections" (Ministry of Education, 2017, para. 4). The value of teachers investing enough time to allow students to access their support was reinforced by both

students and teacher participants in this study and this is considered in the next sub-theme for discussion.

6.2.1.3 The Significance of Time.

Teachers involved in this study considered their commitment of time towards students to be an important contributing factor in the development of their STR. This commitment of time appeared to fall into two possible categories: one consisted of small but regular periods of students accessing teacher's time (sometimes over a period of years) and the second related to shorter but more intensive investments of teacher time and was associated with school-based events or periods of high student need. For Charlotte, her teacher's availability throughout a time of high emotional need was considered a formational part of their relationship. Her focus group statement of "she just always had time for me" (Charlotte: s) was one which was underscored by the deep gratitude she felt for the care extended by her significant teacher over this period. Through tears related to her recent family loss, Charlotte was able to recall that she "always had help and if I ever needed someone to talk to, (she) was always there" (Charlotte: s). Charlotte's appreciation appeared less a result of dialogic exchange between her and her teacher than it was a consequence of her simply knowing that this teacher was available and cared for her.

French composer Claude Debussy saw the space or time between each musical note, as holding just as much significance as the musical note itself (Strachan, 2015). This explanation of silence as an asset to connection assists us to understand the importance of teacher's non-verbal attention to their students. In this way student-teacher connection can be seen as "deeply connected to what went before and what comes after" (Wilson, 2022, para. 1). Value is conferred from teacher to student in the noticing of things unsaid, the emotion of those involved and the time teachers take in acknowledging the needs of their students. Students in this study commonly linked perceptions of teacher care with the provision of time to support their needs, whatever those needs may have been.

All students taking part in this study confirmed the necessity of time in the formation of their teacher connection, with Vanessa calling the allocation of this time "the difference in that student's life — the whole difference" (Vanessa: s). This notion is supported by the work of Kezar and Maxey (2014) who looked specifically into the way relationships affected students as they began their tertiary studies. They identified that the time students were able to spend with faculty "and the

quality of these relationships” (p. 31), effectively increased student success rates. The allocation of time from ‘the one caring’ to ‘the one cared for’ (Noddings, 2015) is not unique to education and is also considered important in reducing patient anxiety within nurse–patient contexts. Similar to students in this study, nurse–patient interactions can be experienced as exceptional exchanges “during which the patient perceives the nurse as special, due not only to her caring actions but also to the giving of herself” (Rudolfsson et al., 2007, p. 911). While clearly the notion of time availability between students and significant teachers was considered quintessential to overall relational success, a teacher’s disposition during that time of connection was also considered important by participants.

Both students and teachers involved in this study conveyed the criticality of teacher temperament in their descriptions of successful relationship formation. In this sense, it was not just that conversations were given space and time to occur, which seemed crucial to the relationship, but also that the time given was given freely, without haste or pressure and that teachers were open, warm and welcoming to students. Time given in this way enhanced the student’s experience of feeling valued and also preserved their sense of dignity (Edlund et al., 2013). The importance of unconditional teacher acceptance is considered next.

6.2.1.4 Unconditional Acceptance.

Both student and teacher participants found the element of unconditional acceptance to be an essential component in the formation of their STR. Findings suggested that warmth and openness from teacher to student built trust and safety within the relationship and opened the way for students to step into more reciprocal (Noddings, 2013) exchanges with their teachers. Students required their significant teachers to accept them without judgement or criticism but stressed that this did not always mean that their teachers agreed with them or did not hold them to account for their actions. It did mean however, that they were always accepted by their significant teachers as being valuable and capable, irrespective of their behavioural presentations. Makri-Botsari (2015) suggested such unconditional acceptance by teachers may exert “stronger influences on students’ educational outcomes than unconditionality of parental acceptance” (p. 50).

This notion of unconditional acceptance has a long history in education with Carl Rogers perhaps first defining it in the late 1950s through the use of the term ‘unconditional positive regard’ (Rogers, 1957). Since then, other authors and researchers (such as Assor & Tal, 2012; Cheon & Reeve, 2015;

Leggio & Terras, 2019) have contributed to the work of Rogers in support of teachers' unconditional acceptance of students. In contrast to the experiences of students in this study, the consequence of 'conditional acceptance' was also explored in a study conducted by Roth et al. (2009), where affirmation was given to students only when they conformed to external standards or produced results defined as desirable. Their findings suggested that when a conditional approach to the acceptance of a student was used, it was ineffective and "even parents' use of conditional positive regard as a socialisation practice has adverse emotional and academic consequences" (p. 1119).

Unconditional acceptance sat alongside other markers of teacher connection authenticity for both students and teachers in this study and was seen as critical to the development of their significant relationships. Alongside this acceptance however, student participants also reported the importance of an agentic experience between them and their teachers. Aroha, Vaughn, Vanessa and Maddi felt a strong degree of co-construction within their relational process. Casey expressed the belief that, having had more time and meaningful dialogue with his significant teacher, power differences between the roles of teacher and student were less evident and as a student, there was an increased opportunity for him to be part of their relational process. Noddings (2018) described this as a "contribution of the cared-for to every caring relation" (p. 237). With this in mind, the theme of 'relational equity' and the role of student reciprocity within the STR is considered.

6.2.2 Relational Equity

One of the ways in which students in this study took up more equitable stances within their significant teacher relationship was through their reciprocal response to teachers' extension of care. All students responded to their teachers' genuine and authentic attentiveness by engaging in dialogue, expressing gratitude and co-constructing experiences of connection. These findings are strengthened by the work of Ferguson (2018), who suggested such interactions commonly can include "voluntary interaction, expressive acts of service, reciprocal care and gratitude, and shared accomplishments" (p. 218). In this way, student-teacher connections were considered to be more equitable and co-constructed. Students also experienced a greater sense of autonomy and freedom to step outside of the hierarchical structures commonly associated with other student-teacher relationships. At times, teachers (Ben and Alice) described students extending actions of care towards them, such as helping with practices or noticing when they may not have eaten or drank during the day. Such extensions of reciprocal care also required a degree of relational equity and offered students a sense of autonomy within their student-teacher relationship.

The experience of equitable and fair relational constructs between significant teachers and students was reported widely by students in this study. It connected strongly to student desires to self-determine and their experience of autonomy within school systems, which were commonly experienced as being highly directive. Maddi's sense of autonomy came from the knowledge that information held by her teacher would be shared with her first and that any decisions concerning her would be made only in consultation with her. Such notions of autonomy are represented within self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Luo & Derakhshan, 2024) where relatedness, autonomy and competence represent three basic psychological needs attributing to wellbeing (Patrick et al., 2007). In this sense, teachers forming significant connections with students (as is the case in this study) could be considered 'autonomy supportive', a term used by Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2020) to describe the potential influence of teachers on the music students they studied. They defined these teachers as those who would "consider the students' perspective and needs and provide flexibility without pressure" (p. 98). Their results showed that the provision of choice for students and the avoidance of highly controlling behaviours from teachers enhanced student wellbeing and improved their motivation for the subject. This, alongside the work of other researchers (such as Reeve, 2015; Wu & Dong, 2024), supports the findings of this study which indicate strong connections between student autonomy, positive teacher relationships and student motivation.

In seeking out reciprocal opportunities with significant teachers, the responses of students in this study corresponds with the notions associated with equity theory (Adams, 1963) and the associated findings of Bowles (2016) who suggests that "all individuals have an embedded tendency to seek reciprocity in their relationships, with perceptions of inequity leading to distress" (p. 2). Further to this, Bowles found that a large number of adolescent participants in his study felt themselves to be in inequitable relationships with their teachers. While it was not the premise of this study to determine the effects of student-teacher inequity, it appeared likely from the responses of participants that their experiences of relational equity within the STR contributed to a supportive learning environment and improved student experiences of wellbeing.

Students in this study appeared to link feelings of equity between themselves and their significant teacher to an opportunity to share or co-construct the relational experience. The process of co-construction was identified as an important sub-theme in this study and is explored next.

6.2.2.1 A Process of Co-Construction Within Significant Relationships.

Throughout this study, students confirmed a degree of power sharing between themselves and their teachers to be important. In this way, relational practices between students and teachers were understood by students to be co-constructed. From a teaching perspective, Vesponi (2023) suggested that working in this way attempted to “remove the hierarchy between teacher and student and values the contributions of both” (p. 2). In an earlier study conducted by Mansell (2009) on collaborative and co-constructed classrooms within secondary school contexts, she found “most teachers came to understand co-construction as an essential way of building the relationship with students” (p. 207). According to some students in this study (notably Aroha, Vanessa and Maddi), this process of exchange between themselves and their significant teacher was linked to feelings of reciprocity and belonging within a larger common group. Vanessa labelled this larger group ‘humanity’, emphasising “we are people and it's a two-way thing, like being human is a two-way thing” (Vanessa s). Students feeling as though they also belonged to the same larger group as their significant teacher appeared to be an important part of the relationship co-construction process and instilled within students a greater sense of acceptance and personal value.

Given that the student participants in this study were drawn from adolescents in their final year of high school, the latter work of Chhuon and Wallace (2012) (who also studied senior high-school aged students) is particularly interesting. They explored the notion of ‘being known’ (as opposed to wider concepts of school belonging) and established that “students’ affective relationships with teachers are associated with important academic and developmental outcomes” (p. 379). I believe that the findings from this study augment other more recent studies (such as Allen et al., 2022; Osterman, 2023; Uslu & Gizir, 2017) suggesting that school belonging (and the role that student–teacher relationships play in this) has important short and long-term implications for both academic and social development. Indeed, student experiences of school belonging are believed by some researchers (such as Allen et al., 2018; Keyes, 2019; Poole, 2025) to be more significantly influenced by the student–teacher relationships than they are parent or peer influences to these same experiences.

Aligned with notions of belonging and inclusion according to students in this study, were the students’ experiences of appropriate teacher humour. Students found that humour offered opportunities to feel connected to a common group in ways that felt safe and co-constructed and this influence is discussed next.

6.2.2.2 The Use of Humour.

Vanessa interpreted her experiences of appropriate teacher humour, expression of emotion and prioritising personal and student welfare, as authentic and humanising behaviours which strengthened connections and grew relational trust. Deeper conceptions of authenticity and 'being human' were closely linked to the use and understanding of humour between teachers and students. According to Chappell (2020) the words humour, humility and humanity all come from the same base word of 'humus', meaning 'of the earth'. In this context it is possible to understand how the use of appropriate humour by teachers may remind students that they share similarities that reach beyond those differences related to contrasting groups or identities. This connection between humour and belonging is also supported by theorists such as Mara (2022) who suggested that being able to laugh at the same things could reinforce collective belonging. Rosenblatt (2017) maintained that such belonging was representative of a basic human need and was therefore strongly connected to wellbeing.

Student participants said that their teacher's use of humour also contributed significantly to perceptions of equity and safety within the relationship. For Vanessa, exchanges of humour between her and her significant teacher were examples of "taking down the wall" (Vanessa: s) and in doing so, she was left feeling valued and trusted. Whilst student participants accepted and appreciated their significant teachers extending trust and surrendering some of what might be perceived as conventional teacher–student power differences, they were clear that in doing so, neither teachers nor students abandoned their roles or identities. The sharing of power "does not mean that power dynamics disappear; rather it means intentionally working to create structures and processes that support empowerment" (Cook-Sather, 2023, p. 195). Cook-Sather (2023) acknowledges that by reducing power inequity within student–teacher relationships, the experience of empowerment for students within those relationships is supported. Students in this study understood that engaging in significant teacher relationships did not commit them to some kind of symmetry or sameness with their teacher. Their responses communicated a sense of empowerment within the STR whilst still maintaining their own unique identities, opportunities and responsibilities. Ricoeur (2005) maintained that while exchanges occur within relationships, "one is not the other. We exchange gifts, but not places" (p. 263).

6.2.2.3 The Maintenance of Roles Within the STR.

The maintenance of roles was considered important by participants. “Like she still, she's definitely still my teacher and yeah... I respect her 100%” (Casey s). To student participants, this concept of role adherence was easily maintained within their thinking. Teacher participants however were careful in their explanations that the sharing of power through humour, or any other mechanism, was a process that required them to ensure that misunderstandings of roles and responsibilities did not occur.

The process of power sharing between teacher and student has been referred to by Maxwell and Roofe (2020) as part of the ‘lived curriculum’, representing “what students and teachers experience relationally... as they interact with each other” (p. 28). Such notions of curriculum rely upon the recognition of students as individuals, with a primary focus on building relationships. For teacher participants in this study, this process of power sharing appeared less a series of actions than it was a way of being with students. It meant that at times teachers were not “the authority” (Maxwell & Roofe, 2020, p. 33) and were able to adopt a shared learning position which genuinely supported student knowledge. Vaughn described the value of his teacher adopting such a position in relation to his after-school work and future career prospects. Despite her not speaking as an authority for the profession, her input was appreciated and offered a safe and secure sounding board in which Vaughn could explore his own thinking.

In this example the flexibility of the significant teacher’s role appeared to offer students a more diverse landscape of relational possibilities. The next sub-theme to be considered is the adaptability of the significant teacher role and how such role variations appeared to be navigated within the student–teacher relationship.

6.2.2.4 Role Adaptability.

During interviewing, students (and on occasions teachers) made references to role departures within the significant student–teacher relationships they were part of. According to Chang (2019), these departures (revealed in her study through the recognition of ‘non-traditional roles’) were considered an essential element descriptive of caring relationships between students and teachers. While references to role variations in this study did not appear to have literal meanings associated with them (perhaps even occurring below conscious awareness), the frequency by which they were

included in discussions necessitated their selection as a sub-theme. The two roles commonly referred to within significant student–teacher relationships were the roles of ‘parent’ and ‘professional friend’.

The parent role

Vaughn considered conversations he had with his significant teacher to sometimes occupy an advisory role consistent with that of a parent. He remembered his significant teacher being “able to give advice that she would not give as a teacher, that she’d give as a parent” (Vaughn: s). While the value and need for teachers to give advice interpreted by students as ‘parent-like’ is not well-established, outside of the rather outdated educational concept of *‘in loco parentis’* (Bennett et al., 2021; J. F. Goodman, 2021; James, 2021; Joseph & Dinah, 2017), the benefit of advocacy roles adopted by teachers for socially disadvantaged students has been recognised (Ferguson, 2018; Hagler, 2018; Lewis & McCann, 2009). This research may have offered a new perspective however, with a number of students (Vaughn, Casey, Vanessa) referencing the value of ‘parent like’ messages from their significant teachers, despite they themselves appearing to have highly functional parental relationships. Other students (such as Maddi and Charlotte) also reported the value of their significant teachers stepping into advisory roles consistent with parenting. It appeared that the benefits of significant teachers being interpreted through ‘parental lenses’ by students existed irrespective of students’ own parental availability or social risk factors.

According to the work of Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) and their theory of attachment, one explanation of this value may relate to the role that teachers can occupy in student relational development. This theory suggested that, as humans, we rely on relational dyads between care-givers and care-seekers and hold attachment figures for the purposes of regulating “emotional distance and felt security” (Riley, 2010, p. 12). While these attachment figures were commonly experienced as being the mother (believed to have wider implications for how socialisation occurs later in life), a number of seminal authors (such as Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1988; Rogers, 1969) suggested that students may also place teachers in the role of attachment figures. The expectation was for these “subsequent relationships with significant others to have a similar quality to the primary attachment relationship” (Riley, 2010, p. 20). In terms of the possible parental influence within significant student–teacher connections (reported by students in this study), attachment theory supported participants’ experiences and also aligned with the work of Kesner

(2000). He suggested that there was “no other nonfamilial adult that is more significant in a child’s life than his or her teacher” (p. 134).

The parent–teacher role was one of the most commonly understood and regularly experienced departures from the student–teacher dyad according to both students and teacher participants. When students referred to their significant teacher connections, they described teacher practices which appeared to go beyond teaching of the curriculum, physical supervision or the provision of basic human needs. They described significant teachers as affording them a level of emotional care that at times mirrored aspects of care offered by a parent. These connections to parental care were supported by the work of Kurnianingsih et al. (2012) within an Indonesian high school context. In this study students linked teacher trust to parental recognition and suggested that the main reason students had for trusting their teachers was that they were “perceived as being similar to their parents” (p. 85).

Here in New Zealand, Turner-Adams et al. (2023) conducted research with academically high achieving Year 12 and 13 Māori students regarding their perceptions of best and worst teachers. These results showed that students considered the best teachers as those able to combine many roles: “she is like a mother, aunty, sister, and leader all in one” (Turner-Adams et al., 2023, p. 127). These students, like those in this study, considered the significant or influential teaching role as one made up of multiple contributing perspectives from their world experience.

Similarly, Bishop (2019) encouraged teachers to “create an extended family like context” (p. 143) in their classroom as a way of promoting better learning outcomes. He suggested that such environments provided students many of the aspects they needed to succeed. According to Bishop, the ability for teachers to step into ‘parental like’ roles (with marginalised students particularly) provided students important opportunities to connect, built on notions such as positivity, caring, support and trust. In this way, student–teacher relationships had the potential to be extremely powerful and important to a broad range of students, no matter their family or social experiences. Outside of supportive family dynamics, Anderson (2023) also considered that connections with other adults (beyond the family) could be developmentally healthy for young people, as they naturally began moving away from their own child–parent relationship and seeking more independence, autonomy and personal identity.

At times during this study, teacher participants also described students using language that paralleled parental references. Molly spoke of the link between her own children and the students she taught. One way to have considered these types of comments by teachers was through a psychological or psychoanalytical lens, where such behaviours were considered examples of a term that Sigmund Freud defined as 'transference'. In therapeutic fields of study, transference was the propensity in relationships to ascribe past experiences (including emotions and expectations) from oneself onto another person unrelated to the original experience (Levy & Scala, 2012). While the notion of transference as a way of explaining the human condition within relationships was not new, discussion of its impact on teaching and learning appeared less common within the literature.

Shim (2015) suggested that teachers could "transfer unresolved conflicts of a teacher's childhood his-tory [*sic*] onto the current pedagogical events without the teacher being aware of the transfer" (p. 677). While acknowledging the unconsciousness of such teacher bias, Britzman (2013) went as far as to suggest that experiences of learning between student and teachers always encountered influences resultant from transference. If such relational preconditions do exist (as participant responses in this research indicate), their influence on the learning and wellbeing of both students and teachers should be considered (Sherry et al., 2021).

The part that transference may or may not have played in the advent of the last role identified by student participants in this study, that of 'the professional friend', is less clear. However, the idea that significant and influential teachers occupied a relational space (or degree of connection), which was different to other teacher–student relationships, was universally agreed upon by participants. While struggling to find a name that clearly defined this aspect of the student–teacher connection, the term 'professional friend', held resonance for many and is worthy of further discussion.

Professional friend

Student participants in this study had difficulty in defining a term which adequately described the connection they experienced with their significant and influential teachers. They found it easier to describe what their relationships of significance were not. These descriptions included: more than a teacher (though obviously still a teacher); not a parent, not a peer; not a friend; however also perhaps holding aspects from many of these different roles. According to students in this study, they were not aware of any descriptive term commonly used within educational settings which clearly defined the experience of their significant teacher connection.

The notion of a professional friendship found favour with students in this research after it was introduced as a description provided by the trial student group prior to the study beginning. This term was used to describe a teacher role which included some aspects deemed similar to (but not the same as) that of a friendship. Rawlins (2000) encouraged teachers to consider their teaching a “mode of educational friendship” (p. 25), connecting it with positive and edifying practices of communication. Other authors connected ideas of teaching friendship with the meeting of student needs (Gibran, 2015), or when teachers “recognise that friendship is shown when the best interests of students are prioritised” (Davids & Waghid, 2020, p. 18). Students in this study considered the role of the significant teacher to include (if not to rely upon) some aspects related to this type of professional friendship, such as care, support, wise advice, time availability and the personal valuing of them as individuals.

One role employed within some teaching professional development processes in schools surrounds the notion of a ‘critical friend’ or ‘critical ally’ (Hardiman & Dewing, 2014; Timperley, 2011; Wennergren, 2016). This construct of a ‘critical friend’ represents a reflective and trusted relational process between teaching colleagues and is aimed at assisting teachers’ professional awareness and improving teaching outcomes. Although this model may have similarities to the notion of professional friendship (that students in this study attributed to their significant teachers), distinct differences also existed, especially relating to its singular focus on the improvement of teaching proficiency. It also involved less time and in-depth care than the student conceptions of a ‘professional friend’. Despite this, teaching descriptions of the ‘critical friend’ model were still considered to be “complex and hard to internalise” (Wennergren, 2016, p. 275).

One criticism of the ‘critical friend’ construct surrounded its reliance on the formation of certain accompanying teaching attitudes, such as open-mindedness and fallibility (Benade, 2015), which required high levels of safety and trust to overcome. Interestingly, Wennergren (2016) also suggested that one year, or ‘cycle of inquiry’ (which is commonly the length of time teachers are given to form these connections with colleagues), was a short time to develop the types of highly trusting relationships required for true growth and development to occur.

Despite significant student–teacher connections reportedly sharing aspects of professional friendship, student discussion included an understanding that, even within such roles, clear boundaries did exist. Certain practices and behaviours were considered to fall outside of any teacher role, even for those teachers sharing significant connections with students. Students considered

such practices to include the sharing of similar social connections, spending time together outside of school-related functions and the sharing of age and life-stage related problems. Teachers were also in agreement surrounding the importance of maintaining such professional boundaries (Hagenauer et al., 2022; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017). Teachers considered upholding professional boundaries with students to be essential, especially when maintaining significant student connections. Overlain by the possibility of subconscious transference between teacher and student, the need for a process to manage and build awareness surrounding boundary clarity became important for both the teacher and student. Supporting such boundary vigilance within STRs, Aultman et al. (2009) believed that actions promoting emotional connection with students and improving relationships were “the ones teachers may feel students take advantage of or are called into question ethically and morally” (p. 644). The implications of significant student–teacher relationships on teaching boundaries seemed well understood by participants in this study and this concept is considered next.

No-man’s-land

Vanessa’s metaphorical notion of no-man’s-land carried with it connotations of two very separate groups, each with opposing needs, where common boundaries could be difficult to determine. The teacher focus group discussed this notion of boundary adherence further, with Ben introducing his metaphor of ‘a chasm’, which held resonance for many. Ben used this metaphor to describe a relational gap he saw as existing between students and teachers. Both Ben and Vanessa concluded that a separation between students and teachers existed and that this separation had the potential to keep their relationships from becoming significant. If such a relational gap between students and teachers was, as reported by participants in this study, a common experience within New Zealand education, then perhaps there existed an “urgency of intervening into the normal patterns of student–teacher interaction” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 580). While the metaphorical gap between students and significant teachers within this study appeared greatly reduced (compared to participant perceptions of other student–teacher relationships within schools), the more recent work of Nasir (2024) challenged educators to eliminate altogether the “gap between students and teachers so that they can communicate with each other easily without any hesitation or fear” (p. 46).

The notion that teachers could begin to bridge such a gap, or that they engaged in more significant student connections outside of historical expectations of the teaching role, raised

concerns for teachers in this study. They expressed unease that creating more relational connections between themselves and students also exposed them to increased professional risk, which held the potential for ethical dilemmas to develop. Teachers understood that as adults and professionals it was up to them to uphold safe and professional boundaries (which they felt comfortable to do within the confines of purely academic and supervisory teaching responsibilities), however they were also aware that such boundary adherence may prevent the facilitation of STRs. Teachers believed that their relationships held the power to change student lives and while such notions were highly influential to their choosing teaching as a profession, they were also dedicated to teaching in a way which maintained their professional standards and practices, as well as their own personal wellbeing.

Student participants in this study felt a high degree of assurance surrounding the professional standards and boundaries of their significant teachers. This confidence seemed directly linked to equally high levels of safety and trust experienced within the relationship. The theme of safety and trust is woven throughout the responses of participants in this study but also represents an important sub-theme for discussion.

6.2.2.5 Safety and Trust.

Students in this research referenced trust, safety or notions related to these concepts with such prevalence, it became clear that these were indeed unconditional expectations of the significant student–teacher relationship. Not something to be worked towards or merely contributing to such connections, but defining of the space between student and teacher. Baier (1994) suggested “we inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted” (p. 98). For Vanessa, whose parent shared a past connection to the school, the trust-based notion of confidentiality was essential to her significant teacher relationship. Her trust was established through the confidential practices of her teacher, when “no one else heard a word of anything that I said in that room..., that was when I knew” (Vanessa: s).

All six student participants spoke specifically of the importance of having developed a high level of trust with their significant teacher. Relational trust was experienced as the conduit through which they were able to verify external responses from the world in relation to themselves. Students appeared able to receive feedback from significant and trusted teachers in a way which felt safe and supportive of their potential rather than critical of their immediate shortcomings. This kind of

teacher support allowed students to decide if they wished “to risk vulnerability and pursue challenging work” (Chew, 2023, para. 4). As trusted adults in the lives of student participants, significant teacher reflections (regarding student potential, value, etc) could be trusted and at the very least, accepted as a possibility of an accurate and reliable world view, worthy of further consideration. According to Platz (2021), trust could not “be reduced to isolated synchronous instances of interaction” (p. 690), but was reliant (in the case of improved academic education) on a caring and personal relationship. In such instances, realities between students and teachers were shared and relationships persisted over time. Through such persistence, positive histories were created, giving students rationale for their trust to continue to exist into the future.

As the interplay between trust and the themes of relational equity and authenticity were considered, attention turned towards the internal processes of students and the influence of significant teacher relationships to their lived experience. Part Two of this chapter considers the second overarching construct presented in this discussion, Interpretations of Significant Relationships, as well as those themes and sub-themes contributing to it. Under this heading, the second part of the research question is addressed, where discussion begins to consider how the significant student–teacher relational space is understood by student and teacher participants.

6.3 Part Two: Interpretations of Significant Relationships

Part Two of this discussion considers how STRs contribute to participant understanding of themselves and the world around them. This begins by exploring how student self-beliefs changed throughout the time of their significant teacher connection.

6.3.1 *Influences of the STR on Student Self-Beliefs*

Findings from this study suggested that significant student–teacher connections heavily influenced students’ beliefs about themselves, including their self-value, self-beliefs and wellbeing. These findings are supported in the work of Wentzel (2022) who suggested that such connections with teachers provide students with powerful modelling and encourage self-motivation. One sub-theme considered important by participants in this study surrounded their interpretations of the STR and their process of intrapersonal communication. This represented an important sub-theme and is considered next.

6.3.1.1 Student Intrapersonal Communications.

As part of the student focus group exercise, students engaged in a drawing activity where they presented what they considered to be their held beliefs prior to and after their significant teacher experience. They were asked to present their internal thinking or self-beliefs in a diagrammatic form. This process encouraged participants to describe their internal beliefs in relation to their significant teacher connections and in doing so, construct and re-construct understanding of themselves (Van Raalte et al., 2016). All students reported experiencing a range of predominantly negative messaging in their historical self-talk including such words as “not good enough”, “isolation” and “self-doubt”. According to Maddi’s drawing, significantly adverse and destructive messages such as “failure”, “never be enough” and “worthless”, contributed to general low mood and depression. Other student participants, such as Vanessa, presented self-beliefs that were less negative, such as “I wasn’t worth the time” and “my medical problems define me”, but still offered a largely pessimistic interpretations of their value in the world. All students reported positive changes to their internal dialogue which they attributed to their significant teacher experience. Vaughn believed that changes to his internal messages directly influenced his ability to access different life outcomes. Vaughn referred not only to his significant teacher’s belief in his academic ability, but her support and encouragement of those things he cared about outside of school (such as work placement and possible career directions) and the positive dialogue she used with him when communicating.

Internal dialogue or self-talk has been found to be an important process in adolescent construction of self-concept (Jemmer, 2009). Seen as promoting self-regulation, Heavey and Hurlburt (2008) found that “higher frequencies of inner speech were associated with lower levels of psychological distress” (p. 798). Student participants in this study reported their use of frequent self-talk messages and the influence these messages had on their mood. Their perceptions that teachers of significance influenced their process of self-talk, may help explain why these connections held the degree of influence they did for students. The similarity of student participant self-talk was also considered to be high, with such commonalities between internal dialogues, widely supported in the literature (Brinthaupt & Morin, 2023; Scott, 2023; Vygotsky, 1986). Mulawarman et al. (2024) suggested that common emotions experienced within adolescence included “perplexity, anxiety, and self-doubt” (p. 1). Despite the likely widespread nature of self-talk within the population, (including the frequency of negative themes within this messaging), Belmans et al. (2023) were clear

that continued and persistent “negatively biased information processing has been established as a cognitive hallmark of depression” (p. 1).

The need to consider the mental health requirements of students, alongside their need for learning and success beyond the school gate, has arguably never been more important. According to the Youth 19 Rangatahi Smart Survey (Fleming et al., 2020) on New Zealand secondary school mental and emotional health, 23% of young people will experience “clinically significant symptoms of depression” (p. 2) whilst attending New Zealand secondary schools. Suicidal attempts and ideation are also reported to have risen during this time, with World Health Organization (2020) naming suicide as the third leading cause of death amongst older adolescents globally. In a report published recently by UNICEF (2025) on child wellbeing, New Zealand has been ranked 32nd out of 36 countries for overall child wellbeing and was placed last amongst those same countries in terms of overall child mental health. New Zealand Chief Children’s Commissioner, Dr Claire Achmad, describes these findings as “devastating that among other high-income countries, we reported the highest youth suicide rate” (RNZ, 2025, para. 8). Despite the very small number of students participating in this study, the personal face of these statistics was visible through Aroha’s description of managing her depression and anxiety and also Maddi’s ongoing struggle with low mood and suicidal ideation. With these student participants coming from within New Zealand (where according to authors such as (Fleming et al., 2020), adolescent depression continues to represent an ongoing health concern), access to supportive messaging provided within significant student–teacher connections may have far reaching implications. UNICEF Aotearoa New Zealand (2021) is one New Zealand voice suggesting “poor mental health in children and young people cannot be ignored” (para. 1).

Affective fluctuations in the mood of student participants in this study appeared highly influenced by factors outside of school, such as family, peers and other life events. These influences make positive and supportive communication from teachers to their student, an essential protective element offered within the student–teacher relationship (O’Reilly-Knapp & Erskine, 2010; Seon & Smith-Adcock, 2021). Parker Palmer is an award-winning author on topics of education and social change and described his own self-talk process during times of isolation. “Last night, someone asked if I liked being alone. ‘It depends,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I’m my best friend. Sometimes I’m my worst enemy. We’ll see who shows up’” Palmer (2016, p. 3).

Other literature supported the clear link between self-talk, motivation, wellbeing and resilience (Anderson, 2019; Burnett, 2003; Carroll, 2022; Flanagan & Symonds, 2022). Students in this study showed that with the assistance of significant and caring teacher connections, negative self-messages were able to be positively re-constructed. In a study considering sports performance in athletes, DeWolfe et al. (2020) found that pairing “challenging statement[s] to negative ST [self-talk], can be used in a way to enhance performance” (p. 538). In this way, negative self-talk did not necessarily need to be removed for outcomes to change for students. With significant teacher connections offering students opportunities to reinterpret negative worldviews, another avenue for the redress of deeply concerning adolescent mental health figures may be available.

Students found that in holding new and improved self-beliefs, they were able to demonstrate to themselves and others, visible and observable outcomes which they believed related directly to their experiences of a significant teacher connection. The observable outcomes to changes in internal belief structures are discussed as the next sub-theme.

6.3.1.2 Demonstration of New Beliefs: Visible and Observable.

According to students in this study, evidence of internal dialogue patterns could sometimes be experienced or observed by others outside of themselves, despite Jemmer (2009) referring to such intrapersonal communication as the ‘hidden language’. In part, Vaughn’s description of the effect of being noticed by his significant teacher is an example of a change to his internal process. “It has changed who I am — it made me more positive, made me put more effort in, even it was noticed at work” (Vaughn: s). Other students in this study (such as Aroha, Maddi and Charlotte) also reported that improved self-talk had impacted on their external academic or social measures of success. Participant responses suggested that positive academic-based messaging from teachers, influenced student self-belief more widely than their academic confidence. Students applied such positive messaging to other areas of their wellbeing and competence i.e., improvements to personal resiliency and belief in their potential. This finding appears to be at odds with some authors (such as Burnett, 2003) who reported that positive academic messages only impacted students’ academic self-beliefs.

Students were also able to provide other discernible examples of accomplishments they considered directly related to positive changes in their thought processes and self-beliefs. For some, these achievements were experienced through the acquisition of academic qualifications they

thought beyond them, for others, they existed through improvements in confidence, reduction in their levels of stress and anxiety, or improved self-efficacy. For most students, the plans, hopes and dreams they held for their future had improved during their significant teacher relationship. Student participants also agreed that their sense of empowerment and their ability to self-manage challenging situations (both immediately and in the future), had increased. This link between autonomy and resilience amongst adolescents was well supported in the literature (DeWolfe et al., 2020; Reeve et al., 2020), with Mosier (2020) finding that “autonomous functioning was a significant predictor of resilience” (p. 46) in his study of 177 adult Americans.

Improved resilience was a common finding woven throughout student descriptions of their significant teacher’s influence and was strongly linked to positive self-talk. This link was exemplified by Maddi in relation to her historic suicidal ideation. In a purposive sample of 34 depressed Iranian students with suicidal ideation, Sabzipour et al. (2023) contended that by “engaging in positive self-talk, depressed people can create rational, constructive, and positive beliefs about themselves” (p. 66). In this way significant relationships are able to act as a protective factor for individuals with such ideation. According to Maddi, an observable outcome of the connection to her teacher of significance, was the resultant change in the way she viewed herself. She interpreted this change in her internal dialogue as responsible for her success in managing a long history of depression and at-risk behaviours. Maddi attributed this influential, (possibly even lifesaving) change to her mood and maladaptive behaviours, to the relationship she was able to co-construct with her significant teacher.

While the influence of STRs in the growth of students’ academic, socio-emotional and wellbeing functioning appeared clear, the process by which students were able to construct changes to their internal beliefs, may be less well understood. In response to this, one model developed as a result of this study offers a possible description of the way these relationships contribute to the development of student self-beliefs. This model entitled The Space Within model, describes the role of STRs in the development of positive student self-beliefs (Figure. 9) and is discussed next.

6.3.1.3 The Space Within Model.

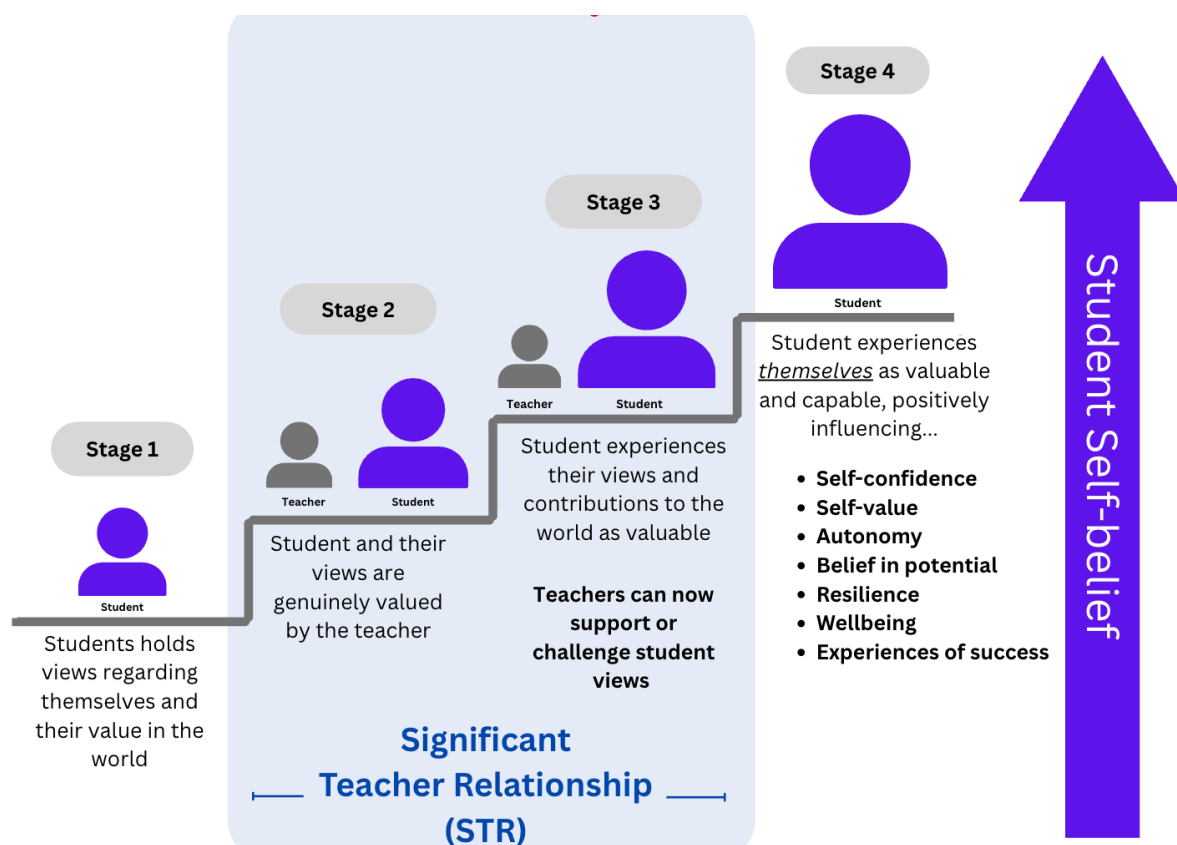
How students make use of significant teacher connections to influence their personal thinking and bring about changes to their lived experiences is not well understood according to the literature I have been able to source during this study. In the model I propose, I have used the themes and

responses from participants in this study to construct one possible model of explanation. The title of this model is drawn from the prominent use of the word ‘space’ within participants’ responses and its metaphorical association with the STR. Aroha and Vanessa both spoke of their STR influencing their self-talk and representing a safe and calm space. Ben referenced the relational space between himself and the student, while Chelsea considered teacher care for students as a space that existed within the teaching role. Given that participants applied the word ‘space’ to a number of different constructs and interpretations related to their internal thought processes within the STRs, its definition in this model should not be considered singular. Instead, the notion of ‘the space within’ should act as a broad metaphor encouraging the reader to consider the variety of student internal processes that may exist within the STR.

My contention is that teacher relationships can accompany and support students in the development of positive self-beliefs within their STR. While the establishment of student self-beliefs are clearly influenced by a number of sources within the lived experience of young people, such as familial and social connections and experiences of prior success (Kampmane et al., 2022; Möller, 2024; Simpkins et al., 2015), the STR also has the potential to be influential in their construction (Johnston et al., 2021).

Thinking surrounding The Space Within model has been supported through the work of Noddings (1984, 2010), whose understanding of caring within schools includes notions of attention, motivational displacement and reciprocity. A model constructed by Owens and Ennis (2005) called “Agne’s model of teaching/learning effectiveness” (p. 420), was developed from the work of Agne et al. (1994). These authors considered the development of student beliefs to be sequential, with one stage building upon the next and this thinking has contributed to the creation of the sequential stages within The Space Within model. Agne (1992) connected notions of empowering individuals (i.e. students), with what she called “deep caring” (p. 121) from teachers and suggested such actions were the key to classroom connections. The model presented for discussion here suggests a number of internal transitions or processes, each building on the last and each contributing to student development of positive self-beliefs.

Figure 9 'The Space Within' Model'



Note. The Space Within model shown above represents one possible explanation proposed by the researcher to describe the role of STRs in the development of positive student self-beliefs.

This model offers a way of understanding changes to student self-beliefs through the experience of STRs. It has four progressions or stages. The notion that each progression of the model is built upon and is linked to the last, is important and it implies that students can progress from one stage to the next. Although the stages of the model have been informed by a range of student data, the stage descriptions that follow are concluded by referencing the same student (Aroha), to allow readers the continuity of a single student's experience across the stages of the model.

The first stage of the model was based on the notion that students came into relationships holding views regarding themselves and the world, which they considered to be important.

Stage One: Prior student views

The first stage acknowledges those things that matter most to the student as they come into their significant student–teacher relationship. This stage suggests that students begin school with pre-existing views and beliefs regarding the world and their place within it. These existing beliefs are considered to be true from the student perspective and therefore inform the values held by the student. Beliefs can differ depending on the various circumstances of individuals, however historical events, culture and relationships with others (such as peers and family), are often influential to the views students construct about themselves and the world (Chaplin & John, 2010; Donohue, 2021).

While students in this study were not asked to disclose their values directly, it was clear from their responses that most (five of the six interviewed) valued both academic success as well as a range of other factors relevant to their social and emotional development and general wellbeing. Such socio-emotional values included concepts which could be connected to Maslow’s early work on the human hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Specifically, students valued notions of safety and security, as well as a sense of connectedness and belonging (Trivedi & Mehta, 2019). Their significant teacher relationships may have represented one of the ways in which students experienced their needs being met.

Charlotte and Maddi may have connected their teacher relationship strongly to the need for a secure parenting relationship (Bowlby, 1988; Kahn, 2017), perhaps due their parent’s absence either physically, emotionally or both. For these students, the value of their significant teacher (perhaps unknowingly) met an important familial need, especially in time of stress or ill-health. Attachment connections that students may have formed with teachers have been referred to earlier in this chapter (see part 6.2) and as Rose et al. (2019) explains, “children will form ‘bonds’ with significant adults outside of the family, such as teachers, who can become ‘attachment figures’” (p. 2). According to Charlotte and Maddi, a relational connection of this nature represented something of high personal value, which was not always available within their family of origin.

Casey and Vanessa were both highly proficient academic students whose continued achievement was supported by (but not reliant upon) their significant teaching relationship. For these students, their need to be recognised as valuable and worthy persons in the world outside of their academic performance seemed to represent an area of personal significance. Environments with ongoing and high levels of academic expectation have the capacity to leave students to define themselves as

successful and valuable only through the lens of such achievement (Poliner & Benson, 2017; Relay Graduate School of Education, n.d.). Growing research, especially in the area of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011; Steinmayr et al., 2018), points to the value of student wellbeing in wider contexts of positive emotions, relationships, life-meaning and accomplishments.

Vaughn's values incorporated aspects of his life outside of school and included his future career aspirations. Holding these constructs as valuable and important gave meaning to his schooling and offered him a sense of purpose. Academic support may have represented less of a priority than the meeting of other social and emotional needs. Aroha discussed as part of her interview, the debilitating effects of anxiety as she sought to navigate not only the education system, but also the ways she viewed herself. Poor attendance and a reduced capacity to consider an academic future, sat alongside ongoing mental health concerns. Her desire to be free from such experiences represented an important and valuable construct which existed prior to the development of her STR. For Aroha, Stage One was represented in her strong desire to be successful both emotionally and academically. She sought to find experiences of "good things and passionate things... and [be] determined" (Aroha: s). These notions represented the beliefs and values she took into her STR.

From student responses in this study, the process of having these needs recognised and validated by their teacher in a way which was experienced as genuine and caring, was the first step towards changing their negative internal scripts.

Stage Two: Teachers valuing student views

The second stage of The Space Within model includes the establishment of the STR. All exchanges and interactions at Stages Two and Three rely upon the existence of this connection. Stage Two also marks the importance of the teacher genuinely recognising the student and their views and holding them as being important. Relating strongly to the theme Dialogic Acknowledgement: 'Listen to Me Talk to Me', described earlier in this chapter (section 6.2.1), the importance of teachers noticing student concerns personally and then valuing and empathising with their lived experiences in a genuine way, seemed essential to the growth of significant relationships.

The student participants in this research acknowledged the importance of their significant teacher de-prioritising their own agendas, in recognition of those things seen as significant to the student at that time. The importance of teachers appreciating critical and foundational aspects of

student beliefs and values was well supported in literature relating to culturally responsive pedagogy with Māori students, according to Berryman et al. (2018) and Macfarlane et al. (2014). In a similar way, Noddings (2012) referred to these concepts in her discussion on the ethic of care in education. She suggested that important notions associated with caring in schools began with a teacher directing attention or noticing the student and their needs. According to Noddings, teachers noticing and attending to students' needs, required 'motivational displacement' (as she referred to it), which involved the "displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other" (Noddings, 2013, p. 13).

Vanessa explained the importance of her teacher validating the emotions she was experiencing surrounding a medical procedure which did not take place as planned. Her teacher's acknowledgement that she was entitled to feel the way she did given the circumstances and that indeed these things took first priority for him as well, was a revelation for her. "So, having that teacher understand and validate that it was alright to not be alright with the situation, was really special, because none of my other teachers did that" (Vanessa: s). Aroha also reported occasions that remained in her memory due to their significance. These important occasions included for example, her teacher noticing when she had come to school with concerns that occupied priorities outside of academic achievement (such as personal family difficulties). She recalled her teacher also considering these difficulties important and prioritising her time and energy to support her on those occasions. For Aroha, these experiences represented Stage Two of The Space Within model and very clearly identified the significance of her teacher's recognition of her needs. "She called me into her office and just asked me if I was okay and like it was the first time a teacher had even done that for me" (Aroha: s). This was particularly significant for Aroha having come from a school without a culture (from her experience) of teachers setting aside their own professional teaching needs to support their students.

During the interview process, students also mentioned other teachers within their schools who displayed interest in issues similar to them, but with whom they did not experience STRs with. Despite these shared interests, these teachers were not considered to be particularly significant. It became clear that in order for students to have positive values encouraged or negative self-beliefs challenged in any enduring way, more was required of a teaching relationship than simply validating student interests. Analysis of student responses in this study clearly indicated that deeper and more significant levels of student-teacher connection was required for students to change internal self-

beliefs. The important role that significant student–teacher connections plays in enabling students to amend their internal beliefs was clear both during this stage and the next.

Stage Three: Student experiences their views as valuable through STR

Stage Three also sits within and relies upon the relational safety and foundational trust provided within the STR. It is this high level of trust (developed throughout the significant relationship) which validates the teacher’s position as trustworthy and allows students to challenge or affirm their own beliefs with the genuine support of their teacher. Where students had experienced genuine care and had been part of reciprocal and appropriately co-constructed relationship with teachers they trusted, they began to consider their own views (either long held or newly formed) more reliable and their personal confidence was raised. Throughout this process, students began to experience their beliefs (initially considered as only valuable to themselves), as now holding value and importance to a wider world (their significant teacher). This process was not considered one that occurred with haste, but rather through an enduring ethic of care (Noddings, 2012), built over time.

All students in this study reported the influence of their significant teacher connection to growing assurances surrounding the values they held. Recent findings regarding how the adolescent brain develops, suggested that changes to the structure and function of the brain can be traced to changes to “social, emotional, and cognitive experiences” (Dow-Edwards et al., 2019, p. 2). STRs were representative of such experiences and offered one explanation of the power they held to influence adolescent cognition. According to Weyandt et al. (2020) the brain’s ability to undergo such morphological and neurochemical alterations (neuroplasticity) is possible during childhood and adolescence and further study is recommended in this area.

Student responses also revealed their potential to be influenced by the views of a significant teacher. If for example the teacher valued attaining academic success, or treating themselves with dignity and compassion, then these values may also influence what the students considered to be valuable and important. Agne (1999) referenced the influence over time of teachers towards students with whom they modelled their beliefs and social behaviours. She suggested that when teachers modelled caring behaviours and actions in the classroom, “students in turn, begin to adopt caring beliefs and model the consequent behaviours to each other” (p. 179). While not specifically represented as part of The Space Within model, the notion that significant teacher beliefs may influence existing student beliefs was an important part of relational co-construction during this

stage. The work of both Noddings (1984) and Agne et al. (1994) are important contributors to this thinking.

Aroha interpreted her beliefs as holding value beyond herself, firstly through the trusting relationship she had developed with her significant teacher. Her understanding of being allowed access to her teacher's office if required "is like 'I trust you, you need to trust me', I think that kind of has that message" (Aroha: s). This trust reinforced the reliability of others holding similar values within the university course she attended. Aroha recalled not feeling confident "until she pushed and then I went on that [university programme] - I'm like, I've no clue what's going on, but I love it." (Aroha: s).

Stage Four: Student experiences themselves as valuable through STR

The final stage of The Space Within model (Stage Four) represents the student's growing belief, not just that their views hold value and are important, but that they themselves (as holders of those views) must also be valuable and important. It suggests that as students interpret their personal value beyond their views and beliefs, significant contributions are made to a range of affirming positive pro-social constructs.

Casey expressed his appreciation in being individually and uniquely noticed and valued by his teacher of significance and recalled that such interactions left him feeling as though he 'mattered'. "I'm an actual person ... I like have feelings and emotions... [I feel] appreciated — present" (Casey: s). The notion of 'mattering' was taken a step further by Flett (2018) who suggests that "mattering is essential to wellbeing and unfortunately, it has been largely neglected by the academic community" (p. 4). A meta-analysis conducted by Harris and Orth (2020) suggested that "high self-esteem does lead to improvements in a person's social relationships. Moreover ... that the link between social relationships and self-esteem is truly reciprocal in all developmental stages across the life span" (p. 1473). For students in this study, feeling that they mattered to a teacher with whom they had built deep levels of trust, confidence and respect towards, was experienced intensely. Students receiving extensions of care from teachers who they felt genuinely valued and respected them, required them to at least consider the possibility that they were care-worthy or valuable. In this way, self-esteem and positive self-beliefs were nurtured. Flett (2018) considered the importance of feeling valued, linking it to "the precise moment when you realize that you are special to someone who matters to you" (p. 3).

For Aroha, Stage Four of the model was represented in the changes she noticed to the way she now viewed herself. Through her significant teacher experience, she was able to acknowledge what she described as higher self-worth. “I have a big heart and I've got a lot to give to others and I'm proud to be able to look at myself in the mirror now and not feel like that failure as before” (Aroha s). This stage can also be the most visible and for Aroha, large-scale improvements to her academic outcomes, confidence and resilience and was visible to many. “I can actually do it... 'I could actually be here.' And 'I can actually work hard and make this happen'...” (Aroha: s).

While the possible outcomes available from such student–teacher experiences were as diverse as the participants themselves, common themes from students in this study reflected improved self-belief, confidence, autonomy and resilience. Students also considered these outcomes to be ones that would follow them into future aspects of their lives. Writing on the transformative potential of student–faculty partnerships within higher level education, Cook-Sather (2023) assures her readers that such improvements come from within the student themselves, using “the transformative potential of partnership” (p. 196).

Throughout the various stages of The Space Within model, the size of the figure representing the student is seen to grow. This growth from stage to stage was indicative of the student’s growth in positive self-beliefs during that time. The model also showed that during Stage One, the student was on their own (i.e. not accompanied by the teacher). This indicated that the teacher was not a significant part of the student’s internal development at that time. Similarly, during Stage Four of the model, the student is not accompanied by their teacher and was able to access their range of pro-social self-beliefs without teacher support. The teacher figure is present during Stages Two and Three indicating their involvement during this period of STR development. The consistent size of the teacher figure indicates that they are essentially a catalyst for the associated student growth and while they may also experience growth at this time, it is likely to be of a professional nature and therefore not applicable to this model.

The implications of teachers maintaining their significant and influential student relationship were similarly not reflected in this model. Whilst teacher participants in this study appeared to give freely of their time and resources to maintain significant connections with students, they also reported that the emotional demand that such connections made of them, were significant. They suggested that such demands represented the greatest influencing factor to them as professionals

choosing to engage in significant relationships with their students. The affective demands of teachers maintaining significant student–teacher connections are considered next.

6.3.2 *Affective Influences on Teachers*

Teacher participants in this study located relationship development as an important reflection of their values, morals and beliefs. While they also considered this relational approach a useful tool to improve student academic and behavioural outcomes, this was not reason they chose to teach in relational ways. Resourcing and time allocation given by schools to promote student–teacher relationships seemed to vary amongst participants, however they felt that the development of relational connections with students was not commonly prioritised by school leadership. This was particularly so when compared to such things as curriculum, assessment and the behavioural management.

Teachers were asked to consider the implications that their relational ways of teaching had on themselves and their practice. They reported the ‘emotional labour’ (Yin et al., 2019) involved in maintaining such relationships with students as being significant and this concept is considered next.

6.3.2.1 The Emotional Work of Significant Student Relationships.

Teacher participants in this study discussed the emotional requirements of forming significant student connections. All teachers agreed that teaching is an emotional endeavour, with the work of Corcoran et al. (2018) and their study on the effects of high school social and emotional learning programmes, adding support to this contention. Teacher participants all gave examples of taking on large responsibilities within their schools in support of student relational development. In a broad meta-analysis of teacher emotional labour strategies, Yin et al. (2019) suggested that teachers often agree to such practices as a way of supporting “not only students' academic results, but also their mental health and social emotional learning” (p. 1). As caring teachers with very relational ways of connecting with students, this emotional labour was often not accounted for by schools or indeed the teachers themselves. Findings from this study indicated that while the results of maintaining caring relationships with students could become a source of professional satisfaction for teachers (Pedota, 2015; Yin et al., 2019), the work of building these relationships also claimed emotional costs, “often invisible, unacknowledged, or devalued” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 123).

6.3.2.2 STRs – Both Sustaining and Challenging for Those Teachers Involved

All teachers in this study described their preference to teach in a relational way and found that closer and more significant student–teacher connections offered positive outcomes which they found desirable. Ben’s metaphor of an iceberg featured notions of respect, status and positive memories as sustaining him in the role, while Alice felt an internal sense of pride by seeing her students become successful. Chelsea and Molly referenced their sense of accomplishment in seeing students develop into young adults and for Chelsea this development had particular value when it connected to success outside of academic achievement. Supporting such reflections, Pedota (2015) maintained that both teacher self-efficacy and retention were positively influenced by experiences of student success. Connections between teacher satisfaction and student–teacher relationships were also supported within the findings of Lavy and Bocker (2017) who linked job satisfaction with improved teacher–student relationships.

Alongside teacher examples of STRs maintaining personal wellbeing and professional satisfaction, experiences of fatigue and exhaustion was also prevalent in their reflections, with Newberry (2010) confirming that the demands of meeting student needs can be “physically and psychologically exhausting” (p. 1696). Despite the research interviews for this study being conducted relatively close to the start of the school year, teacher responses already included references to the term ‘burnout’ (Mijakoski et al., 2022; Nápoles, 2021) and the difficulty of self-care within education. According to Matthews (2023) who studied differences in teacher burnout between different types of teaching, this appears to be an issue which “continues to plague the education system” (p. 3). Of the four teacher participants involved in this study, three indicated that they were considering leaving the profession due to exhaustion. The other teacher had already taken the proactive step of reducing her working week to four days, as a way of managing the impact of her workload.

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association recorded teachers leaving the profession for the 2017/2018, 12 month period as being 21% (Post Primary Teachers’ Association, 2018). This figure did not include teachers leaving due to retirement. In any regard, teacher retention continues to create ongoing disquiet in education and the responses from teachers in this study contribute to those concerns. Any possible link between relational ways of teaching (as exemplified by teachers in this study) and teacher exhaustion or desires to leave the profession is unknown. However, the notion that teacher participants in this study largely felt unable to continue in the role, should be of

concern to the profession, especially given the value and influence teachers such as these were likely to have on the students they work with.

As educational providers and persons tasked with the care and growth of young people, Kecskemeti (2011) argued that teachers needed to ensure that they did not inadvertently collude with “an extreme practice of care.... producing unreasonable expectations towards teachers” (p. 224). Teachers sharing their lived experiences of the role was considered one way to better establish acceptable workplace expectations, with Booth et al. (2016) suggesting that without such conversations, teachers ran the risk of becoming “prisoners of what we alone experience” (p. 9). Given that teaching is a profession considered by some to be ‘a calling’ (Madero, 2020) (more than an occupation), workload expectations may be more challenging to establish compared to other less relational professions. In any case (according to teacher participants in this study), teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion whilst being asked to also maintain STRs, were likely to be at greater risk of leaving the profession prematurely, without appropriate recognition or school support. The call for better systemic support is strengthened through the work of Martin (2025) who examined the influence of trauma informed self-care practices among K-12 educators within the U.S state of Tennessee. She argued that teachers “must be supported, structurally, culturally, and equitably, by school systems committed to humanizing the profession” (p. 99).

As teachers spoke of their growing fatigue within the role, the difficulty of finding a balanced and sustainable approach to the STR became evident.

6.3.2.3 Balancing the Emotional Demands.

Teacher participants were not asked directly for their perceptions of how sustainable their STRs were and it was also not the intention of this study to outline recommendations around teacher workload or healthy workplace expectations. Teachers were however, given a platform to explore how their current student connection practices influenced and affected their professional and personal experience of the role. Throughout these conversations, teachers commonly referred back to the notion of balance, often drawing links to their own wellbeing. “It's difficult, trying to balance everything” (Molly: t); “I live a life where I'm balancing these things” (Ben t); “it's so hard to juggle your time” (Alice: t).

None of the teachers interviewed felt they had achieved a good balance between their own wellbeing needs and meeting the needs of students with whom they had formed a STR. Relationships with these students required additional levels of emotional energy which they were largely not resourced by the school to accommodate. According to teacher participants, the increased emotional demands of maintaining STRs without systemic support practices, created an environment where the teachers' own resources had become depleted and an imbalanced workload had begun negatively impacting on their own wellbeing (Humphries, 2025). Such conditions made reliable and professional practice more difficult.

Chelsea and Ben both spoke of the difficulty of confidently navigating professional decision-making within the STR. Each reported a lack of professional support from within the school which contributed to the emotional load associated with maintaining STRs. A professional supervision process (should such a support process have been available) may have been of some benefit to teachers in reducing relationally based stress and supporting their professional decision making. Supervision processes such as this are common practice and part of professional requirements in professions such as social work, nursing and counselling. Such processes aim to support professional skills through the "safeguarding of competent and ethical practice, oversight of the practitioner's work for adherence to organisational expectations, and support for practitioner wellbeing" (Beddoe et al., 2020, p. 17). The incorporation of such supervision within teaching support processes would require significant resourcing. According to Davys et al. (2017) who studied supervision evaluation practices within the New Zealand fields of counselling, mental health nursing, psychology and social work, the supervision process represents "an activity that underpins good, safe practice" (p. 257).

6.4 Summary

This research has explored the lived experiences of STRs, focussing specifically on the experiences of New Zealand Year 13 students and secondary school teachers. The nature and landscape of these connections have been examined in the light of literature and considered alongside the critical characteristics which participants considered supported and maintained them. Throughout this project, the contribution of STRs towards an 'ethic of care' (Noddings, 1984) within education has been highlighted.

The study has also illustrated the importance of authentic connections being co-constructed between students and teachers, through practices of teachers genuinely noticing students, engaging

them in supportive dialogue, allowing them time and unconditionally accepting them as valuable and important partners in the educational process. Alongside these examples of authentic connections, participants have demonstrated the importance of relational equity between student and teacher within STRs, the value of teacher role adaptability and the necessity for high levels of safety and trust to be woven throughout their experience.

This study has also highlighted the influence of STRs on the student's view of self. These included the reported changes to student self-belief structures and how such changes contributed towards improving student socio emotional and wellbeing outcomes. The Space Within model was also presented suggesting a possible student internal process by which STRs may contribute to the development of new student self-beliefs. The emotional work of teachers maintaining such highly demanding student relationships, the implications of teacher exhaustion related to this and the value of professional supervision to support teachers within this process, has also been discussed.

The next chapter offers a conclusion to the thesis and establishes its contribution to new knowledge. The Implications of this study along with the recommendations for further research are also considered and the limitations of the study are also acknowledged.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This research has explored the lived experience of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships (STRs), for six Year 13 students and four teachers within four Lower South Island secondary schools in New Zealand. By engaging both student and teacher perspectives, the nature and landscape of these relationships have been described and the influence that such connections have on participants have been explored. Students and teachers having input into research regarding the caring relationships they were part of was important, as according to Velasquez et al. (2013), such studies “should also assess caring from the perspective of the cared-for” (p. 183).

This concluding chapter presents a brief over-view of the research design and responds to the research question and supporting questions which underpin the study. Other significant findings are also summarised including how this study contributes to existing knowledge. The limitations of the study and recommendations for further research in the field are also considered and the chapter is concluded with a summary and final thoughts.

7.2 The Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Research Design

This research located itself within an interpretivist philosophical position. As a researcher, I see the world subjectively where multiple possible interpretations of knowledge can exist simultaneously. Educational research of this nature in my view, lends itself to the Interpretivist paradigm (Noon, 2018), as understanding of student relational experiences with their teachers can be subjectively understood, personally interpreted and grounded within the individual experience (Cohen et al., 2017).

For the purposes of this research, I considered STRs (as identified by students) to be an observable phenomenon (Krauss, 2005), where rich and deep understandings of their development and influence were possible. As such, I used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodological framework to gather data surrounding student and teacher lived experiences. I also sought to hold firmly to the phenomenological, idiographic and hermeneutic approaches embedded within an IPA framework, as a way to better understand the experiences and stories of individual participants (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Fletcher, 2020; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The theoretical

framework chapter (Chapter Three) explored the literature surrounding these research design decisions in some depth.

7.3 Findings of the Study and Responses to the Research Questions

This study explored the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of being in significant and influential student–teacher relationships and how is this relational space understood by students and teachers?

As part of this exploration, participants responded to interview questions (see Appendices E and F) designed to provide data surrounding the study’s four supporting questions shown below.

- I. What critical characteristics do students use to describe the nature and landscape of significant student–teacher relationships (STRs)?
- II. How do these characteristics contribute towards an ethic of care between students and teachers?
- III. What influence does the student–teacher relationship have on a student’s experience of themselves, i.e. their self-value, self-belief and wellbeing?
- IV. How do significant student–teacher relationships influence teacher experiences of their role and how do these experiences shape their practice?

What follows is a summary of the study’s findings in relation to these supporting questions.

7.3.1 What Critical Characteristics do Students Use to Describe the Nature and Landscape of Significant Student–Teacher Relationships (STRs)?

While students in this study sought to convey the depth of their significant teacher experiences, most found it difficult to find words that fully describe their STR. Nevertheless, an overarching finding from this study was the central role that connection played in the development of significant relationships. Commonly phrases such as “actually caring”, “always checks up on me” and “no matter what, I’ll be here for you”, were chosen by students as ways of describing the actions of their significant teacher. Such actions align well with the elements of relationship, identity and emotion which Schwartz (2023) suggests “form the heart of connected teaching” (p. 1).

Teachers described their understanding of significant relationships in ways which also attested to the importance they placed upon forming caring connections. Chelsea reflected that students could download academic learning from websites but needed their teachers to be people who cared about them. Such statements from teachers underlined the passion and values behind their teaching and helped explain why they had been identified as teachers of significance and influence by students within their schools.

Critical characteristics of STRs were identified by participants under the two themes of Authentic Connection and Relational Equity.

Authentic Connection comprised the sub-themes of:

- Teacher commitment to notice the student
- Dialogic acknowledgement: 'Listen/talk to me'
- The significance of time
- Unconditional acceptance

Student participant responses supported the importance of teachers noticing them as unique and valuable individuals and conversing with them in ways which offered them time and unconditional acceptance. The opportunity to be listened to and have their thoughts considered was also deemed to be an important characteristic of relationship development.

Relational Equity comprised sub-themes of:

- Co-construction within significant relationships
- Role adaptability
- Safety and trust

An experience of co-construction within relationships was considered important by students and promoted ownership and equity between them and their teachers. Such relationships were described as 'two-way' and students spoke of the value of their teachers stepping outside of their teaching role and offering advice from other perspectives when required.

According to all participants, significant connections could only develop within frameworks of high emotional safety and trust. Descriptions of how such relational security came to exist between

student and teacher varied according to the unique experiences and perspectives of the individuals concerned. Common examples however included experiences of confidentiality, use of appropriate humour and the ability to reliably maintain other authentic connections such as the allocation of time, noticing student needs and using open and honest practices of communication.

Linked within the critical characteristics of significant teacher connections described by students, was the importance of teachers genuinely extending care when seeking to connect with students and for this care to be accepted as such by the student.

7.3.2 How Do These Characteristics Contribute Towards an Ethic of Care Between Students and Teachers?

An ethic of care was fundamental to the notion of STR development between students and teachers as reported by participants in this study. Such an ethic incorporated the teacher characteristics of engrossment (also referred to as attention), motivational displacement and reciprocity (Noddings, 2013, 2018). These notions appeared to correlate closely with stages Two and Three of The Space Within model (presented in Chapter Six). This model was offered by the researcher as one possible explanation for the way student self-beliefs were able to change within a STR. These stages (Two and Three) essentially illustrated the conditions required for STRs to develop. Noddings' descriptions of care compared closely with the themes developed in this study, such as 'teacher commitment to notice student', 'attributing time', 'speaking with and listening to students', 'unconditional acceptance' and 'relational equity'.

Student participants in this study also described a process of reciprocal caring within their relationships, where their care was extended from them, towards their significant teacher. While this study did not attempt to measure or compare the degree of this reciprocity in relationships, examples of it included student acceptance of their teacher's care by showing gratitude or accepting their support. Noddings (2012) suggested that such actions that showed "caring has been received" (p. 772), were actions of reciprocity from students. Teachers also described examples of students caring for their welfare, when for example they noticed that they had missed their lunch or in the view of the student, they were not staying hydrated during the day. This process of reciprocity where students were able to extend care towards the teacher, was considered important in maintaining the significant relationship. According to student participants, it built relational equity between students and teachers and supported feelings of safety and trust within the STR.

7.3.3 What Influence Does the STR Have on a Student's Experience of Themselves, i.e. Their Self-Value, Self-Belief and Wellbeing

All students in this study considered that their STR experience had contributed, in some cases extensively, to their sense of self-value and their experiences of personal wellbeing. Students described important changes they had noticed to their own self-talk and self-messaging throughout the time of their relationships of significance with their teacher. They interpreted these changes as positive and considered demonstrations of these new belief structures to include improved academic results, reduced anxiety, improved resilience and an increased belief in their future potential.

Stage Four of The Space Within model suggested that when students believed that their personal principles and beliefs were considered valuable and important by their significant teacher (within their STR), they were then able to experience themselves as valuable and important also. This final stage of the model describes a student's ability to apply their new self-beliefs to varying lived contexts and begin to believe new and more positive scripts of themselves. Such scripts may include 'I am valuable', 'I am capable' and 'I am resilient'. By accessing more optimistic self-concepts, student participants experienced greater socio-emotional growth, improved belief in their own potential, as well as improved motivation and wellbeing. Wentzel (2022) similarly links caring teacher relationships with growth in student motivation. Student participants in this study considered their new beliefs to be transferable into different contexts outside of school, so that improved confidence and levels of motivation were also able to be directed towards future decisions and opportunities.

7.3.4 How Do STRs Influence Teacher Experiences of Their Role and How Are These Reconciled Within Their Practice?

Teachers in this study all considered themselves to have a relational approach to their teaching. They committed themselves and their resources to noticing the needs of their students, displacing their own motivation for those of their students, attributing the best possible motives to student actions and engaging in reciprocal and caring exchanges. They were student-centric in their teaching and were committed to working within what Noddings (2013) called, an 'ethic of care'.

While they agreed that working in such a way connected with their rationale for entering the teaching profession and made certain aspects of their professional role easier and more enjoyable, they also believed that the demands of working in this way commonly outweighed their resources. All teachers considered the stress or extra energy required in maintaining the closer student relationships associated with STRs, as something that could not be maintained within their current workload without support. Despite interviews taking place essentially at the beginning of the school year, three of the four teachers in the study were considering leaving the profession, with the other teacher having already reduced their teaching load to four days a week, as a way of managing the demands of the role. Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016) suggested that teacher experiences such as this highlighted the ‘stark contrast’ in education between the professional expectations on teachers to holistically care their students and the provision for that teacher’s own professional wellbeing.

7.4 Contribution to New Knowledge

7.4.1 *The Contribution of STRs to Student Wellbeing and Experiences of Success*

This study’s contribution to new educational knowledge highlights the potential of STRs to make positive contributions to student wellbeing, socio-emotional growth and also support their holistic success whilst at school. Should the development of such connections be considered a more intentional educational practice (rather than incidental to curriculum delivery or behavioural management), then the number of students experiencing such STRs are likely to increase. According to Ings (2017), it is time for schools to step away from their ‘myopic focus’ on academic outcomes and appropriately value other forms of success. Auckland University’s Growing Up in New Zealand study suggests that New Zealand’s poor adolescent mental health and declining wellbeing represents a “serious barrier” (Tait et al., 2023, p. 13) to successful outcomes for students. According to participants in this study, STRs have the potential to improve both the wellbeing and experiences of success for students within New Zealand school systems.

7.4.2 *The Value of STR for Students*

The historically accepted notion that significant teacher connections and the development of student socio-emotional growth holds a lesser educational priority for high achieving academically capable students has been challenged in this study. Purposively selected student participants represented a very broad range of Year 13 adolescents and included those seen as highly academic,

occupying in-school leadership positions and also those who would likely be considered socially successful. Yet all students reported significant personal growth and development which they attributed to their STR. This highlighted the associated difficulty for schools in accurately predicting which students were likely to be in greater need of STR opportunities, as according to student participants in this study, significant improvements to student wellbeing and socio-emotional development had been experienced by all those interviewed.

7.4.3 *The Promotion of Wellbeing in Education at This Time*

The current global climate of poor adolescent mental health (Fleming et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2025; World Health Organization, 2020) has been referred to by some as a 'crisis' (McGorry et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2025) in terms of youth wellbeing. As such, it gives rise to increased calls for action from schools who are arguably uniquely positioned to influence such outcomes for students. The STR offers one such vehicle that schools may employ to improve student mental health according to students in this study. Alongside the clear wellbeing needs of students within educational contexts, recent statistics regarding teacher wellbeing and retention in the role are also concerning (Kecskemeti & Winslade, 2016; Post Primary Teachers' Association, 2024; Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2023) and educational organisations are being challenged to consider the wellbeing needs of teachers within their care. This study has highlighted the increased emotional labour (Newberry, 2010; Yin et al., 2019) required of teachers engaging in STRs. The need for school leadership to acknowledge and support this additional teacher workload has been clearly reported by teacher participants in this study. Should STRs be considered a valuable way to promote better holistic outcomes for students and represent a strategic intention of the school, appropriate resourcing would be needed to ensure this commitment was sustainable for teachers.

7.4.4 *Honouring Student Voice in the Interpretation of STRs*

Students being asked to self-report or "find the meaning" (Bishop, 2019, p. 56) in their experience of STRs was an important characteristic of this study. Involving students in the identification of participants (both themselves and their teachers), was not a common occurrence in other studies relating to student-teacher relationships that I had been able to source. Accessing student voice and participation in this way, not only offered the potential for new perspectives in relational understanding, but also supported the wellbeing of research participants by fostering opportunities for student authenticity, belonging and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Walkington &

Ommering, 2022). Recognition of students “as knowers” (Cook-Sather, 2023, p. 200), emphasised their importance in the construction of knowledge concerning them (Watson et al., 2023) and offered a compelling addition to research.

7.4.5 *The Inclusion of Regional New Zealand Participants*

Finally, the use of six students and four teachers from regional New Zealand contexts also contributed to new knowledge provided within this study. Using a local context outside larger urban New Zealand centres, offered the collection of data potentially different to more urban settings (Skerritt et al., 2021). This break from common research practice allowed voices to be heard from areas commonly under-represented in knowledge construction (Noonan et al., 2024). The inclusion of such data brought depth and diversity to existing knowledge and also allowed findings to resonate more widely as student voice was considered “grounded and sensitive to the local context” (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p. 125).

7.5 Implications and Recommendations of This Research

The responses of participants in this study present compelling evidence that significant and influential student–teacher relationships contribute positively not only to student academic outcomes, but also to the development of positive self-beliefs and improved wellbeing. These findings offer New Zealand educators in particular, the opportunity to weave unique notions of cultural competency (associated with relationship building, connectedness, agency and reciprocity) (Berryman et al., 2017; Bishop et al., 2009; Glynn, 2015; Macfarlane et al., 2007) into new educational frameworks that champion student–teacher connections and improved social and emotional outcomes for all students.

Craig (2007) considered that true improvement in children’s social and emotional skills was “caught from the teacher rather than formally taught in lessons” (p. 96). Student participants in this study similarly attributed their growth in such skills to experiences of connection within the STR. In this way, relational learning was more significantly influenced by individual conversations with teachers than through the application of any pre-acquired knowledge set. Student wellbeing and socio-emotional growth also appeared connected to individual student–teacher conversations, where the commitment of teacher time was interpreted as a communication of student value (Peachey, 2020).

7.5.1 *Implications for Students*

This study supports the notion that students who develop significant and influential relationships with at least one teacher, may also experience improved academic, socio-emotional and wellbeing outcomes from their schooling experience. These improved outcomes appeared achievable irrespective of student context. Students who are aware of the connection between STRs and improved school outcomes may seek out such STRs and potentially value their development as an important contributing factor towards their overall school success.

7.5.2 *Implications for Teachers*

In light of the findings of this study, teachers may be interested in reflecting upon their own teaching practice and the importance of STR development to holistic student outcomes. This study has also highlighted the emotional energy required by teachers in maintaining these connections and a potential gap between student relational needs and the provisions of appropriate teacher support resources. Teachers should be encouraged to seek out such professional support as a means of redressing this gap. Sustaining teachers to remain within the profession whilst engaging with their students in significantly relational ways, seems essential.

7.5.3 *Implications for Schools and Educational Institutions*

I believe this study demonstrated the need for teachers to be supported in developing STRs with students and for educational institutions to recognise the provisions of these relationships as legitimate educational outcomes. For this to occur in New Zealand, schools would need the support and direction of the New Zealand Ministry of Education, who themselves would need to acknowledge (as this study suggests) that relationships of significance between students and teachers are not only beneficial for those at risk, but likely have wider implications for the growth and success of all students.

With this in mind, the following recommendations are made.

- Whole school professional development could be offered to schools (and resourced by the New Zealand Ministry of Education) to improve teacher understanding of STRs.
- Similarly, school trustees could also be offered learning support programmes around the influence of significant student–teacher connections. These trainings could include an

opportunity to develop school-wide strategic intentions which seek to value, prioritise and maintain significant connections between staff and students.

- A process of professional staff supervision (offered through external supervisors) could be made available to schools to help support teachers with managing significant student connections and maintaining personal wellbeing.
- The New Zealand Ministry of Education may also consider establishing a working party to develop guidelines that promote and acknowledge STRs as valuable school objectives, highly influential of future student success and wellbeing.

7.6 Limitations of This Research

As with all research projects, a number of limitations presented themselves throughout the study and these need to be acknowledged.

Interpretive phenomenological inquiry seeks detailed and nuanced accounts that describe phenomena from individuals' lived experiences. To collect such accounts using the resources available, a total of 10 participants were able to be selected to take part. Although a requirement of this study was not to gather data for the purpose of generalising to larger populations, small participant numbers such as this, limit the possible range of experience that can be included. The application of these findings beyond this study is therefore at the discretion of the reader (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Tümen-Akyıldız, 2021; Weil, 2017).

Responses from participants asked for memories, interpretations and beliefs surrounding their experiences of the world. In this sense, data was subjective, constructed by participants and unable to be verified by other sources. The narratives of participants were therefore not presentations of single verifiable truths, they were a re-presentation of participants' multiple layers of perceived realities, over-lain by my own interpretation and unconscious biases. The subjective nature of participant interpretation was an accepted limitation of this study.

Another limitation relates to the age chosen for student participants. Limited to Year 13 students only, the demographic of this participant group was consistent with students who had at least been successful enough within a school system to begin the final year of secondary school education. It is unknown if students who had chosen to leave school previously (or students at younger year levels), may have held different experiences worthy of being included.

Due to a reliance on student self-appraisal within this research, STRs may have existed between students and teachers that were not reported by students in the initial questionnaire. Non-reporting of significant relationships may have occurred due to issues such as poor comprehension, inaccurate valuation or other factors unknown. While processes and questions were constructed (and cross-referenced with external groups prior to the study) with the intent to reduce misinterpretation, it is possible that some significant student–teacher connections were not acknowledged as such and therefore were not able to be included in the data. Similarly, the use of a Likert Scale (see Chapter Four, p. 74) for students to rate their teaching relationship’s level of significance and the decision to only select from students reporting six or above out of ten (level of significance), may have precluded some participants from taking part.

A further limitation of this study came in the form of my own subjectivity as the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richmond, 2022). With more than 30 years in the professional roles of counselling, teaching and in senior leadership within secondary schools in New Zealand, my experience of student–teacher relational care has been broad. For this reason, my previous experience and knowledge contributed to my positionality as researcher and the consideration of these “multiple roles and positions” (Fenge et al., 2019, p. 3) became important. Whitson (2017) suggests that recognition of “the importance of researcher subjectivity in reflexive practice has the potential to provide additional insights” (p. 304). I used the processes of supervision, reflexive practice and journaling to improve my own researcher awareness (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). According to IPA theory, personal bias can never be completely ‘bracketed’ or set aside and I wish to acknowledge these influences within this study.

7.7 Recommendations for Further Study

Teachers in this study clearly described a working environment where connecting relationally with students within STRs meant engaging in professional practices that on balance, did not support their personal wellbeing and was not considered to be sustainable. Further study to determine how widespread this experience was among teachers in New Zealand and what contribution (if any) it makes the numbers of teacher who are choosing to leave the profession earlier than predicted, may be useful.

This study conducted interviews with Year 13 students in their final year of high school education. An area considered useful for further study relates to the age of student participants and the

relatively short time period in which responses for this study were collected. It is possible that students at different developmental stages (ages), encounter STRs in different ways and so studying participants at these different stages would offer different results. A study which undertook to gather student experience at different school ages may provide valuable information regarding how best to meet student needs throughout the year levels. Similarly, engaging in more longitudinal research that followed the same students through the years after high school and into adulthood, specifically focused on the longevity of self-beliefs formed at the time of their STR, would add depth to current understandings.

Little is known regarding the frequency of students encountering such significant relationships with teachers whilst at high school. Further study in this area may provide schools with important pastoral data, not only to inform the wellbeing progress of their students, but also the allocation of resources to sustain or improve these relationships. This study has also indicated that teachers (even those identified as working in highly relational ways with their students) had little accurate understanding of the impact of their relationships on students, or even in some cases, the identity of those affected most. Research seeking to improve teacher understanding of their influence on students could be crucial to teachers improving their own practice and the holistic outcomes for students.

Study of the literature (such as Macfarlane et al., 2017; O'Toole et al., 2019) has referenced close connections between the strengths of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (such as self-awareness, relational skills, self-management and social awareness) and Māori cultural approaches to learning (such as Manaakitanga¹² and whanaungatanga¹³). Given that these concepts also fit well within the capabilities outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum, in particular Managing Self and Relating To

¹² Manaakitanga. Refers to the Māori construct of caring which encompasses aspects of hospitality, kindness and respect for the needs of others.

¹³ Whanaungatanga. This Māori term has a meaning which relates to the close connections or relationships developed between people who share similar experiences. Whanaungatanga may contribute to a sense of belonging within a group.

Others (Ministry of Education, 2025), a study into the effectiveness of a programme which drew strengths from both constructs may be of value, especially within New Zealand contexts.

This study has also touched on the potential for the psychological notion of transference to play a role in relationship development between students and teachers. With little known work regarding the influence of transference between students and teachers within educational contexts, it is likely the concept is not well understood by educationalists. If teachers are to be encouraged to develop significant and professional relationships with students, then further research around those aspects with the potential to impact student–teacher relationships may be important. This may be especially constructive for teachers and schools wishing to define professional boundaries in ways which safely encourage the development of STRs.

7.8 Concluding Comments

This research was prompted by noticing significant and influential relationships develop between some students and teachers and wondering how these relational spaces contributed so powerfully to student experiences of themselves. Reading literature and conversing with colleagues confirmed the importance of such connections but did little to explain the processes by which they influenced student experience. What mattered most to students within STRs and how these things contributed towards the construction of hopeful, valuable and capable student self-beliefs, was not well understood. This study has revealed the lived experiences of 6 students and 4 teachers within STRs. Their interpretations guide the findings and strengthen current understandings of this most influential of educational relationships.

Welby Ings (Ings, 2017, 2022) is an award winning New Zealand author, teacher and filmmaker who challenged educational thinking. He considered that “the quality of relationships formed by teachers with a group of students, affects something far more profound than a collection of outcomes” (Ings, 2017, p. 60). The notion that teachers, through significant relationships, hold the capacity to influence the life outcomes of their students, has been supported through the lived experiences of the participants in this study.

The Space Within model (presented in Chapter Six) postulated that through the STR experience, student beliefs can be acknowledged and validated as important and of significance to the world. I contend that when student beliefs are recognised in such a way, students then experience this value

as 'real' and reliable and student self-belief grows. What students in this study have very tentatively put forward as valuable within their STR, is of course themselves. According to 19th century American poet, philosopher and lecturer Ralph Waldo Emerson, "our chief want in life is, somebody who shall make us do what we can" (Emerson, 1884, p. 213).

Participants in this study were clear regarding what they believed constituted the critical conditions for STRs to occur, referencing essential themes surrounding authentic connection and relational equity. With the participant's lived experiences adding support to the longstanding work of Noddings (1984, 2012, 2013, 2018) and other influential authors, understanding of the student-teacher relational phenomena has moved from being a somewhat 'fuzzy' or 'intangible' concept (Chang, 2019), to a series of clear and powerful messages that have important implications for students and teachers, as well as the wider teaching profession.

Teacher relationships have left an impression on students in this study, that like the students themselves, are diverse and unique. Such influences have included improving motivation and achievement, influencing students' vocational choices, reducing anxiety and even (in the case of Maddi) that a significant teacher connection may have provided the motivation for a student to continue their life. In any regard, there is no doubt that these students have constructed important changes which they attribute to the relationship formed with their significant teacher. It is time that the formation of STRs between students and their teachers becomes a possibility for every student's school experience.

Students in this study have experienced teacher connections where "caring becomes visible" (Rudolfsson et al., 2007, p. 913). At a time where the latest UNICEF (2025) child wellbeing report describes New Zealand as having the highest adolescent suicide rate out of 36 OECD countries and where the New Zealand government statistics for Term Four of 2025 publicise regular school attendance at 57.3% (Education Counts, 2025), the importance of attending to student wellbeing and improving their experience of success within school, cannot be over-stated.

Alongside these figures sits a report on the teaching profession produced by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (2023) which states that 58% of New Zealand teachers are 'quite likely or very likely' to leave the teaching profession in the next five years, with stress and workload issues offered as the most common causes. It is my belief that New Zealand education is in chronic need

for students to develop significant and influential relationships with their teachers and in a profession already under stress, teachers will require resources and support to step into such roles.

It took one person to believe in me... and my world changed... all I needed was one person who meant something to me to actually say that. (Vaughn: s)

I couldn't have done it without her. (Aroha: s)

I would not be here if it wasn't for him. (Maddi: s)

Simple words yet with profound implications. It is my assertion that all students deserve to experience a teaching relationship of significance and influence whilst at school. Caring needs to become not only visible, but valuable, sustainable and intentional, if educators want to create spaces which join rather than separate, build rather than diminish and accompany journeys of student discovery rather than lead them.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Initial PowerPoint Presentation Slides to Year 13 Cohort

Teachers can make a huge difference to your day - for better or worse - right?

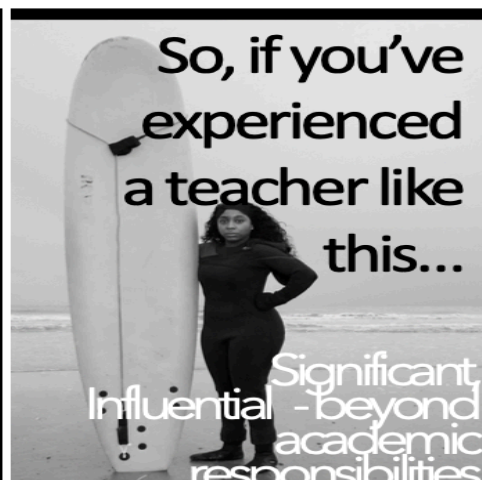
I'm interested in those positive student-teacher relationships that are really significant and influential

But what do I mean by the words

'significant or influential'?



WHAT MATTERS MOST TO STUDENTS IN THE 'YELLOW BOX'?



So...

Very soon you will get an email from the school office with a survey link from me

Please click on it, even if you don't want to be part of the research or haven't had a teacher connection like this

2 minutes of your time - promise!

Thanks!!

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate and Pre-Participant Student Questionnaire

Kia ora. Thank you for listening to the presentation today on my upcoming research called 'The Space Between Us'. This research is looking at positive student–teacher connections, how they form and the impact and influence they can have on you the student. As I said at assembly, my study will use 6 students and 4 teachers to help tell the story of the student–teacher experience.

To help me gauge the interest of people who potentially may want to take part, I have developed a very short 5 question survey. Completing the survey does not mean you agree to participate – it just gives me a starting point of who may like more information.

From our meeting you may remember that the questionnaire really only asks 2 things:

1. If you have experienced a teacher relationship where their impact and influence on you has been both positive and significant – beyond what you might expect from an everyday teaching connection.
2. If you might consider hearing more about taking part in this study by receiving some more detail from me in an email.

By the way, its fine to say that you have had a positive teacher experience like this, but that you would not like to be part of this study. Please be aware however, that both you and the teacher you have identified as being impactful or influential, cannot be part of the same study – if you are selected to take part, they will not be, and vice versa.

You will have noticed that this letter and link to the survey, has been sent to you via your school email address (by the school office). If you do decide to complete this survey, your response will come back to me along with your email address and I will assume you do not mind being contacted by me again with more information (if that is what you indicated in your survey response).

You will also notice if you do choose to complete the survey, that one of the questions asks for your permission to have the teacher you have nominated (as being positively impactful and influential), be told your name. This is important, as if the teacher agrees to be part of the study

(remembering you will not also be a part), they will need to know the particular relationship that we want them to talk about, so will need to know that you regard their relationship in this way.

Now that you have read the above, if you are willing, could you please take the time to click on the attached link and complete the short questionnaire – should only take you 5 minutes.

Thanks so much for your time and I hope to hear from you soon.

#1

COMPLETE

Collector: The Space Between Us (Web Link)
Started: Tuesday, March 07, 2023 10:20:57 AM
Last Modified: Tuesday, March 07, 2023 10:22:16 AM
Time Spent: 00:01:18
IP Address: 122.56.205.202

Page 1

Q1

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this short survey.
Which school are you currently attending?

Q2

Please state your preferred name.

Q3

Yes.

In the last 2 years, have you experienced a teacher who has been significant or influential to you personally - beyond your academic success? Perhaps they made a difference to you at a time that really mattered, perhaps they still do, even if they are not aware of it.

Q4

8

On a scale from 1-10, what number would you say best represents the importance of this relationship to you?

Q5

Please add your email address in the box below if you are interested in being part of the study but would like me to send you some more details to help you decide. (Please note, I will not be sharing your contact details with anyone else).

Q6

As part of this study, I would also like to speak to some of the teachers that students consider to be significant or influential to them. Would you be happy for the teacher you are thinking of, to be approached to take part in this study? If they agreed to take part, they would know that they have been identified by you in this way, but you yourself would not be part of the study.

I'm happy for the teacher I'm thinking of to be approached and know my identity (only if they become part of the study)

Appendix C

Student Participant Information and Consent

Kia ora (student name)

Thank you for filling in my survey when I visited school the other day. As you no doubt remember, I'm really interested in finding out what great student–teacher relationships look and feel like, and what impact these kinds of relationships have on students in Year 13.

New Zealand research in this area is rare, and because I want this to be based on actual student experiences, hearing your ideas about what makes the connections between students and teachers significant or influential, is really important.

So, what do you need to know if you agree to be part of this study?

1. I will need 6 students and 4 teachers between all 4 Southland secondary schools - so I may only need 1 or 2 people from each school. At the end of the day, names will be chosen at random from those that fit the criteria and are keen to take part, so please don't be disappointed if you are not selected, it will certainly not be because you weren't good enough.
2. If you are selected to be part of the study, we will meet 3-4 times over the course of a couple of months and I will try to arrange these meetings at a time that suits you best. Most meetings will be individual (just you and me meeting for 30-45 minutes). One will be a group meeting with myself and the other students involved in the research. That meeting will be slightly longer at around 90 minutes – but don't worry, food will be provided!! All the meetings will be low key 'conversation type' discussions where I will be asking your opinions about teachers who have made a difference for you and had an impact on your life.
3. So that I can remember all you have said, with your permission I will be recording the conversations we have. I will type these conversations up and give them back to you to check that what I have written down is correct. All information will be held confidentially by myself and I will follow the University of Waikato research code of conduct. The final report that I write will not use your real names or anything that might link you or your school's identity to what has been written. I'll even record your conversation with me under a false name - which you can choose if you want.

4. The teacher you consider to be impactful or influential to you, will not be part of the research, if you choose to be. They will not have their name used and will not know that you are part of this study.
5. Your school Principal has given permission for me to conduct this study in your school, and while I will be following the school policies around care for students in your school, they will not know who is participating in the study. You will nominate a person within the school (for instance an office person or the school Guidance Counsellor) who will make sure you are marked present and your attendance is correct (if you are meeting with me during school time for example). No one at school will know what you have said during your meetings with me.
6. As young people over the age of 16, you are able to consent for yourselves, however I would encourage you to speak to your parents or caregivers about taking part in the study and I have available a parent information letter for this purpose.
7. If you do agree to take part but change your mind later, you can withdraw at any time. You can also choose to withdraw the information you have told me, within a certain time frame which I will explain at our first meeting.

Well, that's about it - now that you have this information, please reply back to me with a '**yes I'm still interested**' if you are keen to be considered to take part, or no thanks - either is fine, just let me know.

Hey thanks for considering being part of this study anyway and I hope to meet you soon.

Darren Jack

Researcher, Waikato University

This research has been approved by the University of Waikato Division of Education Ethics Committee on December 7th 2022. Approval number: FEDU076/22

Consent form

I (Name) consent to being part of the University of Waikato research programme entitled 'The Space Between Us'.

- I have read and understand all of the information outlined above
- I understand that my conversation will be recorded (with my permission) and transcribed and kept under the conditions outlined by the University of Waikato.
- I agree to keep our individual interview conversation confidential. If I do need to debrief or discuss what has been talked about, I will do so using the pastoral support processes within the school i.e. the school Counsellor etc.
- I agree to keep confidential both the names of the other students that will make up the student focus group and also who has said what during focus group meetings.

Signed

Date.....

Appendix D

The Phenomenological Interview Process

In keeping with the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology (Frechette et al., 2020; Groenewald, 2004; Høffding & Martiny, 2015; Kvale, 2006), I used a number of concepts to inform and direct my thinking regarding the structure and content of my interviews. My interview questions attempted to encourage participants to ...

- Move from general descriptions or beliefs about the past, to singular lived experiences and actual descriptions of events or experiences (Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013).
- Describe specific experiences and how participant have formed their interpretations of it. (Peoples, 2021).
- Encourage explanation of experiences using ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ based questions (Petitmengin, 2006).
- Co-generate the description of the experience by interviewer and interviewee (Høffding & Martiny, 2015).
- Describe feelings, significance and beliefs surrounding experiences, for example, “what does this change mean for you on a day-to-day basis. What do you mean by the word X!” (p. 8) (Frechette et al., 2020).

Appendix E

Individual Interview Questions

Students

1. Please introduce yourself in a way that feels most fitting to you. Tell me something about who you are as a person – what you most value and believe or how you came to know these things about yourself or others? – (where and when did you learn them)?
 - a. The item you brought that represents an important part of you – why did you choose it and why is it significant?
 - b. I know you have experienced a teacher as significant and influential in your life – you indicated this in the survey, but what made you interested in taking part in this research?

Part 1: Questions reflective of supporting question (i)

2. If you were describing this teacher and your connection with them to a person new to the school, what would you say?
 - a. What was the occasion where you formed that belief – can you tell me about it?
 - b. Can you give me an example of... (based on participant response)? Can you tell me about a time when...?
3. How is your relationship with this teacher different on a day-to-day basis to that of your other teachers? How does it work?
 - a. Can you talk about a time when this was made clear to you?
 - b. Who else was involved?
 - c. What happened next?
4. In your own words, how has that relationship come about? Was there a point in time 'before' you considered this connection as important – was there a defining moment or was the process gradual? – please explain.

Part 2: Questions reflective of supporting question (ii & iii)

5. What do you think makes this kind of student–teacher relationship possible – what are the critical parts or ways you treat each other, that makes sure it flourishes?

- a. Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Part 3: Questions reflective of supporting question (iii)

6. What beliefs or learnings about yourself have you noticed as a result of your relationship with this teacher - if any? What are the 'flow-on effects' of this for you?
7. What are the feelings that go alongside having a student-teacher experience like this? What is the significance of these feelings for you?
8. If you could wave a magic wand over this relationship with your teacher, the school or anything at all to do with your experience, what would you change and why?

Part 4: Questions reflective of supporting question (iii)

9. If your teacher could over-hear our conversation now – would they be surprised at what you have said – why or why not?
10. What's 'the best' of having such a significant and influential connection with a teacher? – what's 'the worst' of it?
11. What do you need me to know that you haven't said already today?

Teachers

1. Please introduce yourself in a way that feels most fitting for you. Tell me something about who you are as a person – what you most value and believe or how you came to know these things about yourself or others? – (where and when did you learn them)?
 - a. The item you brought that represents an important part of you – why did you choose it and why is it significant?
 - b. I know you have been asked to take part in this research and identified as significant or influential to at least one student, but what made you interested in taking part in this research?

Part 1: Questions reflective of supporting question (i & ii)

2. How would you describe what you are hoping to create with students, to a beginning teacher? What examples would you give them and what priority does the formation of a relationship such as this have within your other teaching demands?
3. Is this student relationship different to others – how so and what examples do you have of this?
4. What do you think makes this kind of student–teacher relationship possible – what are the critical parts that it needs to flourish?

Part 2: Questions reflective of supporting question (iv)

5. How aware were you that this student valued their relationship with you the way they do? Was there a defining moment or event that brought this about or do you consider the process to be more gradual? – tell me about these experiences

Part 3: Questions reflective of supporting question (iv)

6. Do your significant student relationships influence you in your role as teacher - both overall and day to day? If there is an influence, how do you manage this?
7. How much intent (time / energy) on your part goes into creating a relationship that a student would describe the way they have? Can you give me an example?
8. What's 'the best part' of having such an impactful and influential connection with a student? – what's 'the worst part' of it?
9. If you could wave a magic wand over this student connection, the school or anything at all to do with your experience, what would you change and why?

Part 4: Questions reflective of supporting question (iv)

10. If your student could over-hear our conversation now – would they be surprised at what you have said – why or why not?
11. What do you need me to know that you haven't said already today?

Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Questions

Students

1. Welcome, food and drink offered.
2. Conversation regarding group confidentiality, recording, summary of discussion (as opposed to exact transcripts being provided), purpose and ownership of drawings etc. Not everything written down needs to be spoken about, but I do encourage you to speak out, even if that's not normally the person you are. You may even choose to express your thoughts in a drawing or diagram if that seems to feel right. The idea is not that we will all agree, or disagree with experiences other than our own, the idea is that we listen to the experiences and consider them alongside ours. The safer we can make our group, the more honest we can be and the more discovery we stand to make.
3. Explanation the 'uh-huh/I've just realised' page on wall to be used to record the moments of new understandings at any time, as the focus group goes on. Sometimes these thoughts come to mind when you are listening to someone else's story. Participants are encouraged to write down these thoughts on post it notes and attach them to the page on the wall, as they will be important and we don't want to lose them.
4. There are 4 drawing activities to be completed and then shared (the parts participants are willing to share) with the other members of the group.

Part 1: Questions reflective of supporting question (i, ii & iii)

5. 'The Journey' – students draw how they came to be who they are today – influences, etc.
6. 'Paint Me A Picture' – The space between a student and their 'significant and influential teacher' – draw what fills this space, what makes it possible, what does it look like/feel like, are there threats to it and how are they managed?

Part 2: Questions reflective of supporting question (iii)

7. 'Old School/New School' – Using a vignette of a student coming from an old school (without a significant teacher connection) to a new school (with a significant teacher

connection), students draw/describe student thoughts/beliefs before and after the 'significant and influential' teacher in their lives.

8. 'Where Two Worlds Meet' – Between the 'teacher world' of curriculum, reporting, duty, academic teaching etc. and the student world of class, peers, friendships, social issues, shared age/stage problems etc., exists 'the space between', (which one student participant describes as 'no-man's land', 'blurry' or 'murky waters'), where students and teachers are not locked into their profiles. This it is said by participants, is where 'significant and influential' relationships reside. Draw the influences or impacts (if any) this space has on students – both in and out of school, now and in the future?
9. From your individual interview with me or anything you have heard today – what things have you noticed/become aware of as being important that maybe you hadn't thought about before, or that are just so important, you would like them emphasised? Would you be willing to share those things with the group?
10. Sometimes talking about things that are really important and significant in our lives can be draining, so let's finish with 3 things you are grateful for from your experience with your teacher and a self-challenge – 'in the future I plan to...'.

Teachers

1. Welcome, food and drink offered.
2. Conversation regarding group confidentiality, recording, summary of discussion (as opposed to exact transcripts being provided), purpose and ownership of drawings etc. Not everything written down needs to be spoken about, but I do encourage you to speak out, even if that's not normally the person you are. You may even choose to express your thoughts in a drawing or diagram if that seems to feel right. The idea is not that we will all agree, or disagree with experiences other than our own, the idea is that we listen to the experiences and consider them alongside ours. The safer we can make our group, the more honest we can be and the more discovery we stand to make.
3. Explanation the 'uh-huh/I've just realised' page on wall to be used to record the moments of new understandings at any time, as the focus group goes on. Sometimes these thoughts come to mind when you are listening to someone else's story. Participants are encouraged to write down these thoughts on post it notes and attach them to the page on the wall, as they will be important and we don't want to lose them.

4. There are 4 drawing activities to be completed and then shared (the parts participants are willing to share) with the other members of the group.

Part 1: Questions reflective of supporting question (i, ii & iv)

5. 'The Journey' – Draw how teachers came to be who they are today – influences, etc.
6. 'Paint Me A Picture' – The space between a student and their 'significant and influential teacher' – What fills this space, what makes it possible, what does it look like/feel like, are there threats to it and how are they managed?

Part 2: Questions reflective of supporting question (iv)

7. 'Where Two Worlds Meet' – Between the 'teacher world' of curriculum, reporting, duty, academic teaching etc. and the student world of class, peers, friendships, social issues, shared age stage problems etc., some students say exists 'the space between', (described as 'no-man's land', 'blurry' or 'murky waters'), where students and teachers are not locked into their profiles. This, it is said (by student participants), is where 'significant and influential' relationships reside. What impact (if any) does occupying this space have on the teacher?
8. 'Teacher Awareness' - If you can draw a continuum in the shape of a horseshoe with one end representing those staff who in your view are unaware and give no thought of their impacts on the student, and no understanding of the types of things students have said matter so much. The other end represents staff who would be fully aware of these things and prioritise these things in all dealings with students. Indicate on your page somehow the distribution of teacher awareness.
9. From your individual interview with me or anything you have heard today – what things have you noticed/become aware of as being important that maybe you hadn't thought about before, or that are just so important, you would like them emphasised? Would you be willing to share those things with the group?

Appendix G

Individual Interview Qualitative Research Coding (Alase, 2016; Saldaña, 2021)

- Data files created.
- Read through transcripts three times to gain a sense or over-view of the responses
- First cycle coding.
- Formed to establish summative or 'essence-capturing' (Alase, 2016) attributes of data, develop significant statements and personal experiences.
- Includes both descriptive and in text (actual language of participants).
- Second cycle coding.
- Focussed or pattern coding, development of physical models and mind maps showing codes from first cycle coding - Saldaña (2021) calls this the "touch test" (p. 346).
- Themes and sub-themes are developed, adjusted and supported by earlier codes.

Appendix H

Focus Group Interview Analysis - IPA Protocols (Palmer et al., 2010, p. 104)

1. Objects of Concern and Experiential Claims.
 - a. Pick out experiential claims and concerns as they appear in the transcript.
 - b. Summarise these and sort into emergent patterns.
2. Positionality.
 - a. Explore the role played by facilitators, keeping track of questions, permissions, encouragements, redirections, etc. (What is their perspective, stance, position?).
 - b. Explore the function of statements made by respondents. (What is their perspective, stance?).
3. Roles & Relationships.
 - a. Examine references to other people: What roles and relationships are described? What sorts of meanings and expectations are attributed to these relationships?
 - b. What are understood to be the consequences of these?
4. Organisations & Systems.
 - a. Examine references to organisations and systems: How are they described? What sorts of meanings and expectations are attributed to these?
 - b. What are understood to be the consequences of these?
5. Stories.

Examine the stories told by participants: look at the structure; genre; imagery and tone. What does each story achieve? How do participants support or impede each other to share their experiences? What temporal referents exist?

6. Language.

Throughout stages 1–5, monitor language use, paying particular attention to use of metaphor, euphemism, idiom, etc. Consider:

a. Patterns.

Repetition, jargon, stand-out words and phrases, turn-taking, prompting – are these identified in individuals or the whole group?

b. Context.

Impact on language used; descriptions of feelings/emotive language; jargon and explanation of technical terms; impact of facilitator.

c. Function.

How/why is certain language being used? (e.g. to emphasise/back-up a point, to shock, to provoke dis/agreement, to amuse/lighten the tone?).

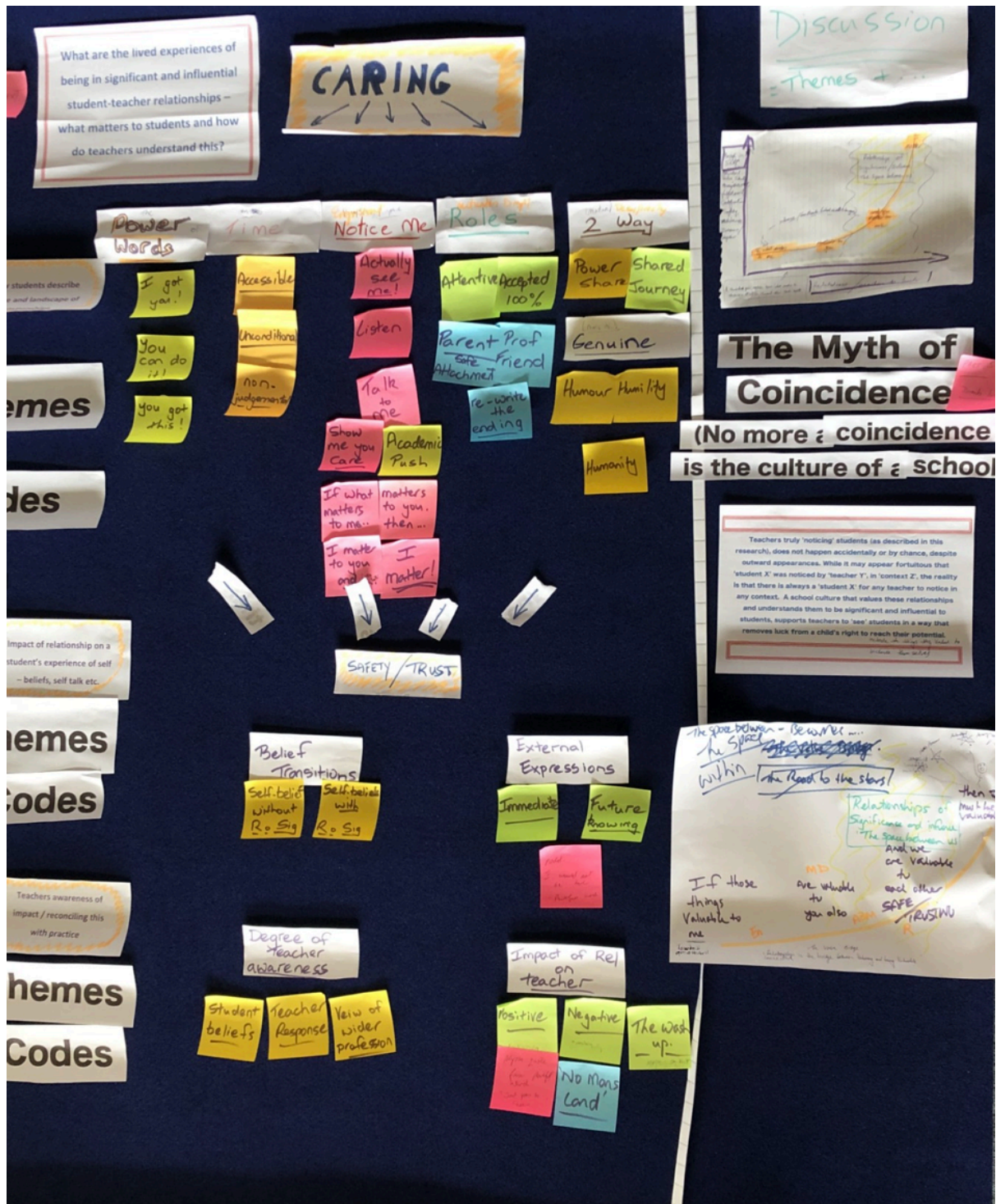
7. Adaptation of Emergent Themes.

Return to the emergent themes from step 1b. and adapt them according to the work done subsequently. Answering the following questions will help:

- a. What experiences are being shared?
- b. What are individuals doing by sharing their experiences?
- c. How are they making those things meaningful to one another?
- d. What are they doing as a group?
- e. What are the consensus issues?
- f. Where is there conflict? How is this being managed/resolved?

Appendix I

Wall Chart – Mind Map



Appendix J

NVivo Data Recording

NVIVO Waikato Univer...IEWS 2023.nvpx Home Edit Import Create Explore Share Modules									
Clipboard Item Organize Visualize Code Autocode Uncode Code In Vivo Spread Coding									
IMPORT Data Files Focus Group - Stud... Focus Group Teacher Interviews - Student Audio Transcript Interviews - Teacher Literature Photos Social Media Survey Untitled File Classifications Externals ORGANIZE Coding Codes Cases Cases Case Classifications Notes Sets EXPLORE Queries Visualizations									
Name	Files	References	Created on	Created...	Modified on	Modified by	Color		
○ 1. Identity of Student	8	53	20 Jun 2023 at 3:1...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ 1. Identity of Teacher	8	106	31 Jul 2023 at 11:1...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ 1. Identity of Teachers - b...	5	13	20 Jun 2023 at 3:1...	DJ	15 Aug 2023 at 12:...	DJ	●		
○ Chance or luck	2	3	31 Jul 2023 at 2:52...	DJ	7 Aug 2023 at 11:5...	DJ	●		
○ Description	13	303	21 Jun 2023 at 10:1...	DJ	26 Jun 2023 at 2:2...	DJ	●		
○ Caring	11	34	20 Jun 2023 at 4:1...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Genuine	6	13	20 Jun 2023 at 4:3...	DJ	16 Aug 2023 at 4:5...	DJ	●		
○ Humor	7	16	20 Jun 2023 at 4:4...	DJ	20 Aug 2023 at 1:1...	DJ	●		
○ Notice Me - Listen - Talk to Me	12	34	20 Jun 2023 at 4:0...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Role Adoption - Friend...	11	26	22 Jun 2023 at 10:...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Safe - accessible	12	38	20 Jun 2023 at 4:1...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Shared Experience	9	43	20 Jun 2023 at 4:2...	DJ	16 Aug 2023 at 4:5...	DJ	●		
○ Time	10	37	21 Jun 2023 at 11:5...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Trust	7	16	20 Jun 2023 at 4:4...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Two Way	10	31	20 Jun 2023 at 4:4...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Value Me	8	15	22 Jun 2023 at 11:...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Experience of Boundaries	3	3	21 Jun 2023 at 2:1...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ Student	3	10	21 Jun 2023 at 2:1...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Teacher	4	15	21 Jun 2023 at 2:1...	DJ	19 Aug 2023 at 3:1...	DJ	●		
○ Family involvement with te...	2	2	31 Jul 2023 at 2:35...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ Metaphors	2	6	20 Jun 2023 at 4:1...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ Power Words	13	52	20 Jun 2023 at 4:3...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ Student Impact Experienc...	8	61	20 Jun 2023 at 1:1...	DJ	25 Oct 2023 at 9:5...	DJ	●		
○ 1. Self-beliefs without r...	1	2	8 Aug 2023 at 4:57...	DJ	16 Aug 2023 at 5:0...	DJ	●		
○ 2. Self-beliefs with relat...	4	9	8 Aug 2023 at 4:5...	DJ	9 Oct 2023 at 4:50...	DJ	●		
○ 3. Impacts of those beli...	3	7	8 Aug 2023 at 4:5...	DJ	9 Oct 2023 at 4:50...	DJ	●		
○ 4. Impacts of those beli...	3	8	8 Aug 2023 at 5:01...	DJ	9 Oct 2023 at 4:50...	DJ	●		
○ Teacher Awareness of Sig...	4	12	21 Jun 2023 at 10:...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ Degree of teachers aw...	5	11	9 Aug 2023 at 2:27...	DJ	11 Oct 2023 at 12:2...	DJ	●		
○ Impact on the Teacher...	5	114	21 Jun 2023 at 11:1...	DJ	21 Aug 2023 at 11:...	DJ	●		
○ Students hard to conne...	2	12	1 Aug 2023 at 2:58...	DJ	19 Aug 2023 at 3:1...	DJ	●		

Appendix K

Ethical Approval: Division of Education Research: The University of Waikato

Te Wānanga Toi Tangata
Division of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton,
New Zealand, 3240

Division of Education Research
Ethics Committee (DEREC)
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7/12/2022

Dear Darren Jack

Division of Education Research Ethics Committee Application Approved FEDU076/22

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application for the project entitled “‘The Space Between Us’ The phenomenon of the student-teacher relationship – what matters to students and how teachers understand this?” was approved by Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee on December 7th, 2022.

Please be aware that the Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee must be advised (by memo) of any changes to the details recorded in your ethics application. Please send any such advice to fedu.ethics@waikato.ac.nz. You will receive a memo of approval once the change(s) has been considered.

Kind regards



Chair

Te Wānanga Toi Tangata Division of Education Research Ethics Committee (DEREC)