

ENHANCING POSITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

by

KRISTINA LERCH-BATSON

(Under the Direction of Jami Royal Berry)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. The impact of positive student-teacher relationships is vast, and leaders can have a direct effect on the quality of relationships in their schools. The following themes emerged from the study: 1) An intentional focus on relationships fostered individual relationships and improved community; 2) Leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships; 3) A foundation of restorative practices created the conditions for learning intentional strategies and moved toward a schoolwide structure for relationship-building. Leaders who support and facilitate formal and informal structures for relationship-building can cultivate the desire for reflection and discourse focused on relationships and contribute to a positive culture.

INDEX WORDS: Student-teacher relationships, Middle school, School leaders, School culture, Middle school leadership, Improving community in schools, Restorative practices

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DEDICATION

The support and encouragement I had during this process is what got me to the end of the road. To my parents, Brent and Janice, for your commitment to my career in education from the beginning. From the “classroom” you let me create with Julia as my lone student to your unwavering support as I navigated becoming a teacher and a leader.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Effective student-teacher relationships improve students' engagement at school and academic achievement and are a core component of effective teaching practices. Teachers and students spend about 40 hours per week working together in classrooms, making the relationship critical to student success. The teacher-student relationship is key to students' achievement, behavior, motivation, and well-being (Hattie, 2012; Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017). According to Sethi and Scales (2020), the relationships between students and teachers are critical at the middle school level, where the quality of the relationship is shown to have more potential for a positive impact on engagement and performance than in high school. Students who report positive student-teacher relationships in middle school show decreased levels of distress during the transition from elementary to middle school (Longobardi et al., 2019).

Not only do positive student-teacher relationships influence the student experience in school, but there is also a positive impact on teacher-reported job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Bosman, 2021; Scales et al., 2020). Teachers with positive student-teacher relationships report less emotional exhaustion and increased enjoyment of their work (Taxer et al., 2018). Outside of the individual classroom, Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2019) found that positive student-teacher relationships across a school foster a sense of belonging to the school and community. When relationships are a school's focus, leaders report a school culture that promotes conflict resolution and trust among students and staff (Lustick, 2021).

Teachers can intentionally increase the quality of student-teacher relationships by using specific strategies to assist in the building of positive relationships (Collins & Landrum, 2019; Duong et al., 2018). Strategies, skills, and beliefs for building positive relationships exist in individual classrooms and schoolwide. Prewett et al. (2018) found that students reported higher-quality relationships when teachers engaged in prosocial classroom behaviors such as sharing, complimenting, encouraging others, and facilitating peaceful interactions. In a study conducted in an urban middle school implementing restorative practices, staff reported increased positive relationships among students and between staff and students (Augustine et al., 2018).

Students identify that one of the most essential factors in building positive relationships with teachers is knowing that the teacher believes in them and their ability to succeed academically and behaviorally (Williams et al., 2019; Woodward, 2018). Acknowledging potential teacher bias and cultural differences is critical when cultivating relationships with students, specifically when students are from marginalized communities or have different backgrounds from teachers (Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Owens, 2023; Townsend Walker, 2020).

While there is evidence that positive student-teacher relationships are significant in the middle school setting, there is limited research on how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. Specifically, this study examined how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

Statement of the Problem

There is a need to enhance the capacity of teachers to form positive relationships with students to positively impact academic achievement and teachers' perspectives of students in the

classroom. Milner (2018) states the importance of relationship-centered teaching to meet the needs of diverse learners, specifically those who are historically marginalized.

Overview of the Research Site Context

Carson Johnson Middle School (CJMS) is a public middle school located in an urban characteristic setting, as described by Milner et al. (2015), with a population of approximately 130,000 people. At the time of the study, the school was made up of 700 students in 6th - 8th grade. During the 2024-2025 school year, teachers at the school had a total of about 80-100 students in their classes, and most students did not know their teacher before the first day of school. At CJMS, students had up to seven different teachers throughout the day, and approximately 30% of the teaching staff was in their first three years of teaching, with 60% being in their first six years of teaching. With high numbers of induction-level teachers, students will likely be in classrooms where teachers are still developing confidence and skills to create a positive classroom environment. This is important when considering student-teacher relationships because teachers with higher self-efficacy and confidence in their ability to create a positive classroom environment and secure relationships with students reported higher quality relationships and less student-teacher conflict (Hajovsky et al., 2020).

Race can be a salient factor when studying student-teacher relationships. Redding (2019) found that Black students have more favorable behavior ratings when in a classroom with a teacher of the same race, and the most significant effects were found in elementary schools and the Southern United States. Similar to demographic trends throughout the U.S., CJMS faculty do not reflect the students they teach (Milner, 2020). In the 2024-2025 school year, approximately 45% of the students at CJMS were Black and 65% of students were Students of Color, while 75% of the teaching staff was White. Positive student-teacher relationships can lead to an

increased cultural understanding of students and push back against stereotypes and bias. Little and Welsh (2019) emphasized the importance of policy and practice to focus on nurturing relationships to decrease the harsh discipline of Black students.

At the time of this study, approximately 42% of students were proficient in English language arts (ELA), and 32% of students were proficient in mathematics as measured by the state assessment system. At the time of the study, proficiency in ELA and mathematics was lower in 6th grade compared to the school, and there was a decrease in performance from 5th to 6th grade, a school-to-school transition year. The average decrease in performance for the five years prior to the study was 4.6% in ELA and 10.4% in mathematics, as measured by the state assessment system. Declines in middle school students' motivation can be positively interrupted by strong student-teacher relationships, emphasizing the importance of relationships at the transition from elementary to middle school (Scales, 2020). Research indicates that students experience more conflict with the teacher of the subjects they perceive to be the hardest (Roorda et al., 2017).

Studies synthesized by Tian et al. (2021) noted that principals who exhibit transformational leadership traits positively influence teachers' ability to form positive student relationships in their buildings. Transformational leaders exhibit the following behaviors in daily interactions with staff: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985). The positive impact of effective student-teacher relationships is well-documented in research, but there is limited research on how school leaders can nurture the development of these relationships (Roorda et al., 2011; Scales, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

The following section identifies the definitions of key terms that pertain to the action research study. This section concentrates on how the terminology directly relates to the study conducted at Carson Johnson Middle School.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following key terms are defined:

- “School Leader” in the context of Carson Johnson Middle School refers to principals and assistant principals.
- “Middle School” in the context of Carson Johnson Middle School is a school that serves students in 6th to 8th grade.
- “Alternative Preparation Program” in the context of this study refers to any certification program for teachers outside of the traditional four-year undergraduate preparation program that requires the participant to already have an undergraduate degree in a non-teaching field and is completed while on the job.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that provided structure for this action research was the Transformative Learning theory. Transformative Learning theory asserts that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information. The teaching experience is shaped by the interactions teachers and students have in the classroom and how teachers respond to students. Critical reflection is a process that leads learners to examine what we know and our frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997).

Through the lens of Transformative Learning theory, teachers learn new information that leads to changes in practice and perceptions in the classroom. While adult learners have the capability of critical self-reflection and reflective judgment, cultivating these two skills is essential to transformative learning and challenging one’s perspective (Mezirow, 2003). Transformative learning relies on the constructivist theory that individual knowledge and meaning are based on experience (Vygotsky, 1978). Adult learners can change their understanding of the world by adjusting their frames of reference through communicative learning, reflection, and discourse (Mezirow, 1997). Meaning perspectives are created based on

an individual's experiences and cultural assumptions (Taylor, 1998). Communicative learning happens through discourse that leads to understanding the meaning of what others communicate.

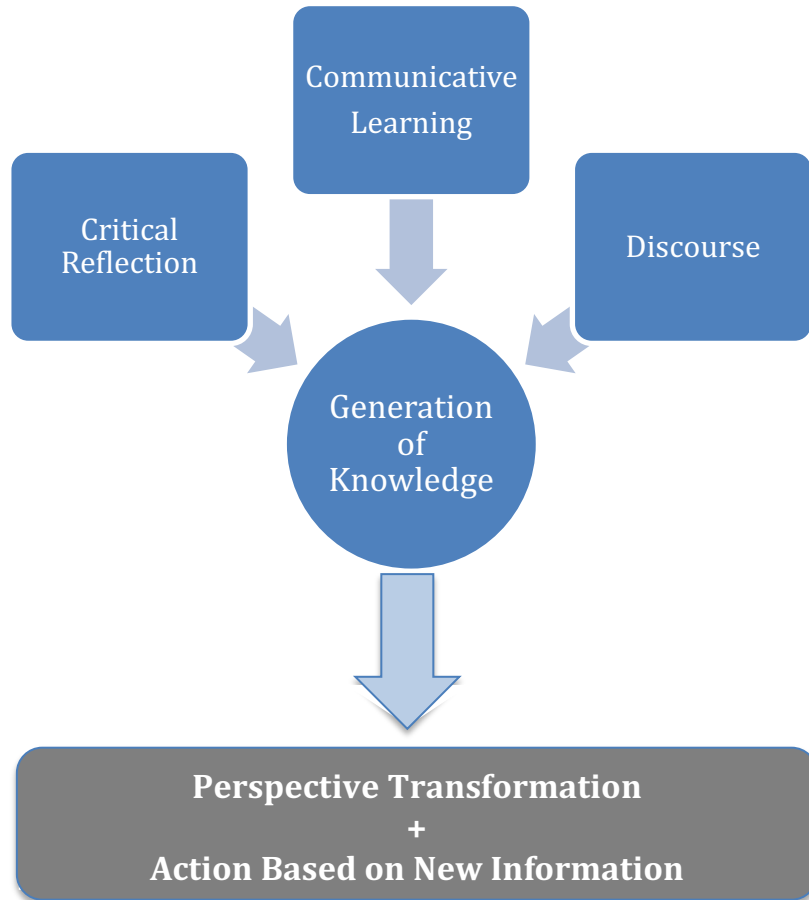
Communicative learning consists of a group of people coming to a common understanding of an interpretation or justification of a belief (Mezirow, 1997). As adults engage in critical reflection of assumptions, beliefs, and feelings, Mezirow (2000) found that learning occurs through processes: expanding on existing frames of reference, learning from new frames of reference to establish a new point of view, transforming habits of mind, and transforming points of view. The goal of adult education, according to Mezirow (1997), is “to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others” (p. 11). Teachers' interactions in the classroom are primarily based on their own interpretations and assumptions.

Taylor (1998) suggests that transformative learning involves meaning making within the self and the sociocultural context as assumptions are challenged. Saavedra (1996) found that teacher transformation occurred when teachers were placed at the center of their own learning through critical reflection in a social context. The following conditions were identified as essential for transformative learning in a group setting (Saavedra, 1996): a focus on members' cultural backgrounds, the essentiality of dissonance and conflict, and the need to act on new ideas to validate newly discovered assumptions and beliefs.

In the study, the action research team utilized a modified version of transformative learning theory adapted from the definition of transformational learning from Mezirow (2001) and the conditions for facilitating transformative learning in a group from Saavedra (1996). The theoretical framework, as depicted in Figure 1.1, shows the actions within the group that lead to transformative learning:

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework for the Study



Note: Adapted from Mezirow (2001) and Saavedra (1996)

Logic Model

The logic model used to enhance student-teacher relationships and school culture was an adapted version of Lewin's change management model (Kuhn, 1951), as shown below in Figure 1.2. The change model is rooted in the idea that change requires intentional planning for adjustments, time to change, and reinforcement of change (Kuhn, 1951).

Figure 1.2

Logic Model for the Study



Note: Adapted from Lewin (Kuhn, 1951)

The current study is based on the idea that to improve teacher-student relationships, teachers must determine the need for change (unfreeze), engage in discourse, reflection, and action (change), and have leadership support as the change is solidified, or frozen, as part of the classroom and school culture (refreeze). The study sought to examine how school leaders provide structures and support to enhance teacher-student relationships guided by teachers' reflections about the impact of changes to practice.

In the action research case study, the unfreezing started with the Professional Learning Community discussing the current state of relationships and the desired outcomes of enhancing relationships. Schoolwide data focused on achievement, discipline, and student perception of school in conjunction with analysis of the initial focus group with participants were the basis for the design of the guided discussion and targeted professional learning as the interventions in the change stage. The refreeze stage consisted of reflection to solidify further the impact of the intervention and leadership support needed to sustain the change.

Overview of the Methodology

Action Research

Lewin (1946) describes action research as “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action” (p. 35). Teacher

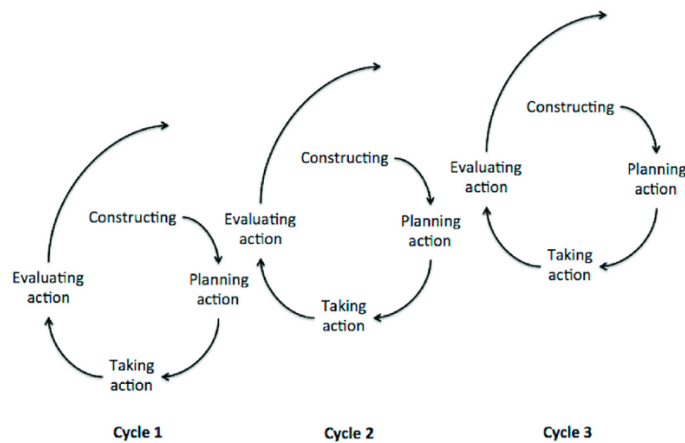
research, as defined by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1990), is “systematic and intentional inquiry as carried out by teachers” (p. 3).

In contrast to traditional research where research is conducted by a group onto subjects for research, Corey (1954) states that action research teams “are conducting their inquiries primarily because they wish to improve their own practices” (p. 376). Action research is carried out by the research team within their own context, and the results are personalized to the context in which the research is conducted. Corey (1954) describes the results of action research as having “meaning for practice because they are the consequence of inquiry under life-like circumstances” (p. 377).

An important characteristic of action research is the cyclical nature of the work. Identifying the problem is essential in action research and, according to Lewin (1946), must be done alongside “experimental comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change” (p. 37). These various techniques of change are decided upon by the action research team as part of research cycles. Coghlan (2019) defines each cycle as consisting of constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action. Multiple cycles occur throughout the action research team’s work and operate under different periods, occurring either one after the other or concurrently depending on the needs of the project, as shown in Figure 1.3 (Coghlan, 2019).

Figure 1.3

Spiral of Action Research Cycles



Note: Visual of the Spiral of Action Research Cycles. Reprinted from *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (5th ed.), by D. Coghlan, 2019, SAGE.

Action research, specifically collaborative action research, was appropriate for this study because collaborative action research focuses on inquiry in multiple classrooms and the use of various methods executed by different members of the team (Calhoun, 1993). The study needed to be rooted in reflection of one's own practice. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2007) describe the process of action research as one where “teacher-researchers examine their own practices and beliefs and how they affect the teaching and learning process” (p. 100). Because of the personal nature of relationships in the classroom, trust must be built within the action research team. Corey (1954) highlights the importance of the makeup of the action research team to include “as many as possible of the people who will be affected by attempts to better a difficult situation” (p. 378); the work of the action research team at all stages will benefit from the cooperation of this team. Calhoun (1993) found that one impact of collaborative action research is the positive effect on the relationships of the members of the team.

The benefits of action research on involved educators are widespread. Educators who participate in action research teams grow their ability to make observations, reflect on their own practice, and feel a connection to educational research (Sardo-Brown, 1995). Action research leads to instructional improvement and is a way for teachers to be actively engaged in site-based decision-making that is rooted in research (Calhoun, 1993). Sardo-Brown (1995) stated that a benefit of action research is teachers' willingness to try new classroom strategies.

This research occurred in a high-needs urban characteristic district. Conducting action research in urban contexts requires a reflective lens and the action research team to examine their own biases around the context in which the research is carried out (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2007). Educator-led research teams allow research to target areas of need identified by educators, not for educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). For the purpose of this study, action research was appropriate because of the involvement of practitioners on the action research team in developing the interventions to address a problem within their own context.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study focused on specific qualitative methods, including:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews with individual participants;
- 2) Focus groups conducted with the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT);
- 3) Observations of Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) meetings and Action Research Design Team (ARDT) meetings;
- 4) Researcher journal notes, including reflexive notes;
- 5) Documents and artifacts.

Interventions

The professional learning community (PLC) of teachers served as the primary vehicle for intervention in this study. The PLC engaged in reflection, collaboration, and professional learning through this group based on their identified needs. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) created interventions based on focus groups with the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), observation of the ARIT meetings, feedback from the ARIT, reflections, and schoolwide data. The teachers implemented the interventions and reflected on the process during the ARIT meetings. The action research team included the researcher, a restorative coordinator, a former school administrator who is currently engaged full-time in restorative practices work, and a teacher who also serves as the school's PBIS Coach.

The interventions included facilitated group discussions, reflection prompts, and professional learning targeted to student-teacher interactions. The action research team designed the interventions around the needs of the PLC.

Significance of the Study

Positive student-teacher relationships have a tremendous impact on students' experience in school in areas including academic achievement, engagement, social-emotional development, and behavior in the classroom (Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Strati et al., 2017). Additionally, teachers report higher job satisfaction when they perceive positive relationships with the students in their classroom (Aldrup et al., 2018; Taxer et al., 2018). Students from historically marginalized groups benefit from teachers who recognize their own biases and intentionally cultivate cultural competence, especially in school contexts where teachers have a different background than students (Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Owens, 2023; Townsend Walker, 2020). Positive student-teacher relationships across a school

impact overall school culture and lower the use of exclusionary discipline (Anyon et al., 2018; Ibrahim & El Zataari, 2019). Middle school is a time of transition, and positive student-teacher relationships help students adjust to new environments and navigate the challenges associated with school-to-school transitions (Longobardi et al., 2019).

This study looked at what structures can be used in an urban characteristic, high-poverty middle school to enhance student-teacher relationships, specifically in a context where the teaching staff is majority White, and the student population is majority Black. This study will also add to the limited research on how school leaders can nurture the development of student-teacher relationships.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study of the dissertation, including the research questions, the problem of practice, and methods for the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature related to the study specific to the impact of, development of, and factors that impact student-teacher relationships. Chapter 3 details the methodology of action research, the qualitative methods related to this study, and the context in which the study was conducted. Chapter 4 describes the findings from the action research.

Chapter 5 presents the Analysis of Findings from the Action Research Case based on the action research cycles and research questions that guided this study. Chapter 5 details and analyzes the interventions implemented by the action research team. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the study and a discussion of the findings related to the research questions. Chapter 6 gives implications for school leaders and further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The literature on the importance of positive student-relationships shows the impact of relationships on students' achievement, behavior, motivation, and well-being (Hattie, 2012; Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017). There is also a positive impact on teacher-reported job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Bosman, 2021; Scales et al., 2020). When relationships are a school's focus, leaders report a positive impact on school culture (Lustick, 2021). Teachers can intentionally increase the quality of student-teacher relationships by using specific strategies to enhance positive relationships (Augustine et al., 2018; Collins & Landrum, 2019; Duong et al., 2018). The positive impact of effective student-teacher relationships is well-documented in research, but there is limited research on how school leaders can nurture the development of these relationships (Roorda et al., 2011; Scales, 2020).

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

To explore the research questions, the researcher worked with an action research team to study the implementation and impact of intentional strategies for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in sixth grade at Carson Johnson Middle School. Observations, interviews, field notes, and focus groups were used to gather perspectives about the implementation and impact of intentional strategies for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

To frame this action research study, the review of the literature on student-teacher relationships was categorized into five sections. The first section discusses the impact of positive student-teacher relationships on students, teachers, and school culture. The second section provides an overview of research focused on the development of positive relationships in schools. The third section explores factors that impact student-teacher relationships. The fourth section discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school culture. The final section explores effective middle school leadership.

Impact of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Academic Achievement

High-quality student-teacher relationships lead to positive academic outcomes. In a meta-analysis of research, Roorda et al. (2017) showed continued support for the positive relationship

between student achievement and positive student-teacher relationships. Hattie (2012) found the effect size of positive student relationships across multiple studies to be 0.72 when relationships consisted of three characteristics: students seeing the warmth, feeling teachers' high expectations, and knowing the teacher understands them. The association also holds for negative student-teacher relationships having a negative impact on student achievement; the association is smaller in the short term and more significant over time (Roorda et al., 2017). Knowing the impact emphasizes the importance of disrupting negative student-teacher relationships.

Scales et al. (2020) found that for those students who had improvement in their relationships with teachers, "academic motivation and positive perceptions of school were higher at the end of the year" (p. 520). Students' grades went up when teachers participated in an intervention focused on improving student-teacher relationships because it led to teachers seeing students in a more positive light (Brinkworth et al., 2018). Sethi and Scales (2020) supported the impact on adolescents and identified that middle school students' grades were directly related to perceptions of student-teacher relationships. Scales et al. (2020) noted a significant influence of positive student-teacher relationships on middle school students' motivation, engagement, and performance compared to that of students at the high school level.

Student Motivation and Engagement

Positive student-teacher relationships have been identified as a key factor associated with higher overall engagement in school (Roorda et al., 2017). Sethi and Scales (2020) emphasized the role of developmental relationships with teachers in predicting adolescent students' motivation and academic success. On the flip side, research warns that adolescent students who perceive negative relationships with their teachers are at a heightened risk for academic disengagement and an increased likelihood of school dropout (Peditzi et al., 2022).

Specific to middle school, when students perceive positive and supportive connections with their teachers, they are more likely to report higher levels of engagement, a greater willingness to work, and more interest in the subject (Sethi & Scales, 2020). Student engagement across subject areas, even when faced with academically demanding assignments, is positively impacted by teacher support (Strati et al., 2017). These findings underscore the implications of student-teacher relationships on students' educational trajectories, emphasizing the need for fostering positive connections to enhance student motivation.

Student Well-Being and Social-Emotional Development

The impact of student-teacher relationships on student well-being has significant implications for adolescent mental health. Meta-analyses of studies suggest a positive association between positive teacher-student relationships and student mental health, particularly during the crucial phase of adolescence (Krane et al., 2016). Studies highlighted that close relationships between students and teachers play a vital role in helping students cope with the demands of school, contributing to their overall well-being (Sainio et al., 2023). Conversely, studies indicated that negative student-teacher relationships can pose a risk to mental health, contributing to decreased self-esteem and heightened levels of depression among students (Krane et al., 2016).

Establishing a safe and caring learning environment through positive student-teacher relationships provides a foundation for social-emotional learning (Peddigrew et al., 2022). Teachers who report positive relationships with students are more likely to engage in conversations about behavior, enhancing emotional literacy and promoting a supportive atmosphere (Dean & Gibbs, 2023). A close and supportive student-teacher relationship is associated with high levels of hope and decreased levels of student distress (Lin et al., 2022).

Longitudinal research demonstrates that positive student-teacher relationships are associated with lower levels of bullying victimization in young adolescents (Forsberg et al., 2022).

Additionally, low-conflict student-teacher relationships are a protective factor supporting students' psychological well-being during school transitions (Longobardi et al., 2019). Positive relationships provide relational support as students adjust to new school environments and navigate the challenges inherent in school-to-school transitions, especially for adolescents (Longobardi et al., 2019). These findings emphasize the interplay between student-teacher relationships and student well-being, showing the need for fostering positive connections to promote mental health and resilience in students.

Teacher Job Satisfaction

The perceptions that teachers have of student-teacher relationships impact teachers' job satisfaction. In a study looking for the relationship between student misbehavior, teacher well-being, and student-teacher relationships, Aldrup et al. (2018) found that positive student-teacher relationships mediated the negative impact that student behavior has on teacher work enthusiasm and lessened teacher-reported emotional exhaustion. Student-teacher relationships were found to be a protective factor against teachers' emotional exhaustion because positive student-teacher relationships are associated with an increase in teachers' enjoyment and a decrease in levels of anger (Taxer et al., 2018). Positive student-teacher relationships improve teacher self-efficacy and belief in classroom management abilities (Bosman, 2021).

Student Behavior

Poulou (2017) revealed that conflictual relationships between students and teachers are linked to difficulties in the classroom. Conversely, classrooms characterized by harmonious relationships result in less emotional and behavioral difficulties, emphasizing the integral role of

positive student-teacher relationships in creating a positive classroom environment (Poulou, 2017). The impact of these relationships is more pronounced in secondary education, as research indicates a stronger association between student-teacher relationships and behavioral engagements at this level (Roorda et al., 2011). Teachers are less likely to report conduct and hyperactivity difficulties negatively when they perceive closeness in their relationships with students (Poulou, 2017).

Positive student relationships and a better understanding of students increased teachers' confidence in how they successfully respond to negative behavior in the classroom (Dean & Gibbs, 2023). When teachers understand individual students through strong student-teacher relationships, teachers more easily identify the root cause of a specific behavior (Anyon et al., 2018). In classrooms where there is a common understanding of respect developed through experience and conversations, there is a decrease in the misinterpretation of disrespectful behaviors and an increase in recognizing respectful behavior (Audley, 2020).

Positive relationships minimize problem behaviors and enhance the effectiveness of interventions and consequences (Anyon et al., 2018). Positive student-teacher relationships empower teachers to respond to problematic behavior through restorative conversations, steering away from overreliance on disciplinary systems and exclusionary measures (Dean & Gibbs, 2023). Teachers with strong student relationships do not rely on discipline as punishment; instead, discipline is seen as an opportunity for student growth (Anyon et al., 2018).

School Culture

Research reveals that positive teacher-student relationships enhance students' development and foster a sense of belonging to the school and its broader community (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019). Mulvey et al. (2021) found that adolescents who report positive student-

teacher relationships are more likely to recognize exclusion as wrong and actively engage in behaviors that promote inclusion, highlighting the effects of student-teacher relationships on schoolwide culture.

School leaders overwhelmingly acknowledged the impactful role of strong student-teacher relationships in shaping the general climate of their building and contributing to lower suspension rates (Anyon et al., 2018). In the study by Anyon et al. (2018), staff at all participating schools identified relationship building as a crucial element in preventing exclusionary discipline. Conversely, there is a negative impact on school climate and culture in schools with a need for more trusting relationships and consistency of teacher practices in relationship building (Liang et al., 2020). Leadership guided by a value system focused on responsibility to relationships over maintaining order creates a school culture that promotes conflict resolution, trust, and positive relationships in the school community (Lustick, 2021).

Impact Specific to Young Adolescents

Young adolescents who report a positive relationship with their teacher are more likely to develop friendships with prosocial students versus aggressive students compared to students with negative teacher relationships (Shin et al., 2019). In response to research showing that student-teacher relationships decline throughout the year for middle school students, especially boys, Brass et al. (2024) conducted a study to look for mitigating factors to this decline. The study found that when students perceived strong student-teacher relationships and promotion of prosocial behaviors from teachers, there was a reported increase in belonging and engagement (Brass et al., 2024). Furthering the idea that declines in middle school students' motivation can be disrupted by positive student-teacher relationships, Scales et al. (2020) found that relationships with teachers had a greater influence on middle school students' motivation,

engagement, and academic performance when compared to high school students. The transition from elementary school to middle school can be challenging for students. Students who report positive student-teacher relationships in middle school show decreased levels of distress during the transition from elementary to middle school (Longobardi et al., 2019). Conversely, high-conflict student-teacher relationships in the transition from elementary to middle school can have a long-term impact, leading to less academic engagement years later (Engels et al., 2019; Hughes & Cao, 2018).

Developing Strong Student-Teacher Relationships

Classroom Interventions

Teachers can take purposeful actions to improve already established student-teacher relationships. Teachers can do this by using preventative strategies with specific students that address the antecedent to previously observed behaviors (Collins & Landrum, 2022). Collins & Landrum note that “preventing a problem behavior before it occurs is preferred to addressing challenging behavior with reactive strategies after the fact” (p.3). Duong et al. (2018) discussed a specific strategy, Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR), and stated that “the intervention had the strongest positive impact on students with the lowest quality relationships with their teachers at baseline” (p. 217). This strategy involves establishing a relationship, maintaining it with a ratio of 5-to-1 positive interactions, and taking a restorative action after any negative interaction (Duong et al., 2018). Yassine et al. (2020) found that there is an indication that the “success of the relationship-building component hinges more on the type of interaction than the frequency of interactions” (p. 404), demonstrating the importance of teachers focusing on interactions as a whole and not each situation. Prewett et al. (2018) found that students reported higher-quality relationships when teachers engaged in prosocial classroom behaviors such as sharing,

complimenting, encouraging others, and facilitating peaceful interactions. In a study conducted in an urban middle school implementing restorative practices, staff reported increased positive relationships among and between staff and students (Augustine et al., 2018). Students identify that one of the most essential factors in building positive relationships with teachers is knowing that the teacher believes in them and their ability to be successful (Woodward, 2018). Teachers build trust through responsiveness and sharing power in the classroom with students; both demonstrate teachers' willingness to listen to students (Scales et al., 2020).

Restorative Practices

Restorative practices have significantly transformed the dynamics of student-teacher relationships in educational settings. Lustick (2021) found that leaders, including principals and restorative coordinators, “often felt compelled to dole out punitive measures due to the fear of being perceived as “soft” or losing control in the eyes of parents, fellow principals, and external stakeholders” (p. 741). This fear-driven approach hinders the development of genuine connections between educators and students. However, schools that have embraced restorative practices have shifted the focus from strict adherence to rules and regulations to fostering meaningful relationships and positive interactions (Lustick, 2021). The implementation of restorative practices not only diminished the need for punitive consequences but also led to an increased sense of community within the school environment (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). Another finding from Dhaliwal et al. (2023) was a notable increase in positive reporting of relationships between students and teachers. Through consistent implementation of restorative practices, students report higher feelings of respect from their teachers, and teachers report fewer discipline refractions (Gregory et al., 2017). This shift signifies a change in the way educators approach

discipline and conflict resolution, emphasizing empathy, understanding, and dialogue, increasing reports of positive relationships between students and teachers.

Social-Emotional Competence

In recent years, research has shown the impact of social-emotional competence on student-teacher relationships and the importance of connecting to social-emotional learning, particularly in challenging educational environments. Implementing restorative practices allows disruptions to be viewed as opportunities for social-emotional instruction rather than punitive measures (Lustick, 2021). This creates environments where students and teachers work together to grow after a disciplinary incident. Legette et al. (2022) emphasize the critical need for teachers, especially those in urban characteristic environments, to comprehend the dehumanization experienced by Black students within school settings. The effectiveness of social and emotional learning is connected to the humanization of Black students. Legette et al. (2022) identify “student-teacher relationships as a key site for rehumanizing Black students,” emphasizing connectivity between student-teacher relationships and social and emotional learning.

The study advocates for targeted social and emotional training for teachers, focusing on social awareness, self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills (Legette et al., 2022). The literature emphasizes the significance of teachers' competence and comfort in implementing SEL practices and their perceptions of emotional intelligence (EI) as crucial factors in shaping how educators respond to student interactions (Poulou, 2017). Poulou (2017) cautions that teachers' perceptions of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies impact the development of positive student relationships; schools must support building the skills and mindset needed for teachers to implement SEL strategies in the classroom

for there to be a positive impact on student-teacher relationships. These findings highlight the importance of targeted interventions geared towards enhancing the social-emotional competence of educators, ultimately fostering positive and supportive student-teacher relationships.

Communication

Research highlights the pivotal role of communication in building student-teacher relationships in the classroom. Creating an environment of reciprocity, where both students and teachers engage in meaningful exchanges, leads to collective responsibility for all individuals' success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By actively listening to students and valuing their voices, teachers convey respect for their students' perspectives. Johnston et al. (2023) found that teachers communicated high expectations through listening because it conveyed to students a desire to understand their needs as crucial over curriculum demands.

As reported by students and teachers, meaningful communication fosters close relationships with students (Aruta et al., 2019). The study by Krane et al. (2017) found that students identified the following types of communication as meaningful in promoting positive student-teacher relationships: problem-solving, one-on-one meetings about academics, casual and informal conversations with teachers, and adapting to student needs. These interactions allow teachers to meet individual student needs and demonstrate a shared understanding of respect and a capacity for compassion. Attributes like kindness, trustworthiness, and genuine caring contribute significantly to developing these relationships (Krane et al., 2017). Teachers create a supportive atmosphere through these communication strategies where students feel heard, valued, and understood. Teacher-student relationships must be equitable, reciprocal, and rooted in cultural understandings (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is fundamental in cultivating positive student-teacher relationships, as research underscores. To establish meaningful connections, teachers must possess a diverse skill set, including the ability to empathize and relate respectfully to students from various class backgrounds, especially those different than their own (Williams et al., 2019). Importantly, these relationships must not perpetuate stereotypes; instead, they should be characterized by genuine care and understanding, necessitating teachers' development of cultural competency (Audley, 2020).

Cultural competency, as defined by Ladson-Billings (2011), is “helping students recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wide culture” (p. 36). In the face of mandated curricular demands, there is a need to grant teachers and students the autonomy to explore materials relevant to their lives (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019). Gay (2002) asserts that diverse students benefit academically when cultural experiences and perspectives are authentically embedded, and their lived experiences are valued by the teacher.

Cultural competence is one aspect of culturally relevant teaching and entails more than merely incorporating students' culture into the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2011). To foster cultural competence in the school, Ladson-Billings (2011) emphasized:

Teachers must work back and forth between the lives of their students and the life of the school. Teachers have an obligation to expose their students to the very culture that oppresses them. That may seem paradoxical, but without the skills and knowledge of the dominant culture, students are unlikely to be able to engage that culture to effect meaningful change. (p. 36).

Creating positive teacher-student relationships is essential to navigating the complexity of diverse classrooms and nurturing relationships, especially in school environments where teachers and students have differing cultures.

Factors that Impact Student-Teacher Relationships

Teacher Expectations

Literature supports the connection between high expectations of students and the dynamics of student-teacher relationships, particularly in the context of low-income students (Williams et al., 2019). Hattie (2012) defined positive student-teacher relationships as those where students see the warmth, feel teachers' high expectations, and know the teacher understands them. A study by Dhaliwal et al. (2023) highlights barriers to fostering positive relationships with teachers who “see student misbehavior as an illustration of something intrinsically wrong with the student”; teachers with this belief tend to resist adopting new behavior management strategies (p. 96). When a teacher has low expectations, they can be self-fulfilling and reinforce the belief (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This mindset impedes the cultivation of a supportive learning environment where student-teacher relationships grow.

Students themselves vocalize how high expectations are communicated. Teachers who invest in positive student-teacher relationships, displaying attributes such as kindness, empathy, and genuine care, are perceived as harboring high expectations (Johnston et al., 2023). Additionally, teachers who exhibit niceness and set a caring example create an environment where students are motivated to reciprocate these feelings (Johnston et al., 2023). The study by Johnston et al. (2023) emphasizes that high expectations are not merely confined to academic standards but are intricately linked with the relational aspect of teaching. Effective student-

teacher relationships do not involve leniency or low academic or behavioral expectations; instead, they are rooted in holding students accountable (Anyon et al., 2018).

Teacher Bias and Cultural Differences

The literature on student-teacher relationships describes the critical role of teacher dispositions, bias, and cultural differences, especially concerning interactions with students from marginalized communities (Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Owens, 2023; Townsend Walker, 2020). Black boys are perceived by teachers as more blameworthy than their White counterparts for identical misbehaviors, drawing attention to the impact of racial bias on student-teacher dynamics (Owens, 2023). Teacher biases extend beyond gender, affecting perceptions of Black girls as well. Townsend Walker (2020) states that the behaviors of Black girls are perceived negatively by teachers compared to girls of other races. Supportive relationships between teachers and students can reduce negative stereotypes and implicit bias, especially when students' experiences and identities differ from the teacher (Gregory et al., 2017).

Warren et al. (2022) found that a teacher's self-concept, understanding of one's own race-gender identity, and knowing why they teach, specifically why they teach in their specific social context, were all important when looking at how teachers chose to interact with Black boys in their classes. The findings from Warren et al. (2022) demonstrate that self-awareness of race and power, regardless of the teacher's race, significantly impacts their relationships with Black students. This awareness is a foundation for meaningful interactions, emphasizing the importance of recognizing one's biases and privileges.

While expressed differently in the classroom, teachers' disposition and commitment to student well-being led to significant humanizing engagements with Black male students (Warren

et al., 2022). Building relationships with students from different backgrounds poses challenges for teachers. A study examining how teachers build relationships with students noted that teachers who participated in the study reported that while it was more difficult to build relationships with students with identities different than their own, it was improved when teachers were aware of the importance of owning their privilege, implicit bias, and position of power as a teacher (Gaias et al., 2020).

Power Dynamics

Teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships are more predictive of classroom outcomes because teachers hold more power in the classroom (Brinkworth et al., 2018). Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2019) state that a positive teacher-student relationship needs three main components: positive affect, balanced power, and complete reciprocity. Mutuality-based respect relies on a balancing of power that can be difficult for teachers, especially early career teachers, to navigate. Respect as a relational process requires cultivating an environment where authority figures are perceived as caring individuals rather than as authoritative figures (Audley, 2020). Conversely, power struggles between teachers and students in the classroom, described by students as teachers abusing or fighting for power, negatively impact the classroom and school climate (Liang et al., 2020).

When teachers resort to excessive power and authority, students often experience fear, embarrassment, and distance in the student-teacher relationship (Aruta et al., 2019). An imbalance of power, particularly evident in classroom decision-making processes, intensifies negative experiences for students (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019). However, Aruta et al. (2019) found that close relationships built on trust and genuine care between students and teachers counteracted the negative impacts of hierarchical power dynamics, highlighting the importance

of fostering positive student-teacher relationships. Interactions outside the classroom, such as participation in school events or community engagements, led to increased positive relationships because it reduced students' perception of teacher power over students (Aruta et al., 2019).

Teachers' self-awareness regarding their social location within broader hierarchies of power and oppression, factors like racism, heterosexism, and ability significantly influence students' access to educational opportunities in the classroom (Warren et al., 2022). Recognizing and addressing these power dynamics are needed to foster positive teacher-student relationships.

Classroom Climate

Students described a comfortable classroom environment as balancing seriousness and positivity (Sethi & Scales, 2020). This delicate balance contributes to students' perceptions of the classroom as a safe and conducive space for learning. Students expressed a need for a collaborative classroom experience that consists of effective time management by teachers, open dialogue, and mutual respect (Liang et al., 2020). The absence of these resulted in students reporting a feeling of unsafety (Liang et al., 2020). The literature emphasizes the connectedness between the teacher's demeanor, the classroom atmosphere, and the quality of student-teacher relationships (Liang et al., 2020; Sethi & Scales, 2020).

Community and Parents

Collaboration between parents and teachers is pivotal in shaping positive student-teacher relationships (Krane & Klevan, 2019). Recognizing the shared responsibility among parents, teachers, and students, Krane and Klevan (2019) emphasize the importance of fostering partnerships. Schools that prioritize relationship-building actively allocate time, establish clear expectations, and equip teachers and advisors with the necessary skills to engage parents as valued partners, contributing to a shared problem-solving approach (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

This collaboration is crucial for at-risk students, where positive student-teacher relationships can be a protective factor (Krane & Klevan, 2019). Notably, the study underscores the need for parents to acknowledge their role in promoting a positive attitude toward school and teachers, challenging negative perceptions (Krane & Klevan, 2019). Connecting the curriculum to the community further amplifies this impact, instilling a sense of community pride and challenging stereotypes that might cast the community as a hindrance to student success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Parents' recognition of their influence on their child's experiences with teachers highlights the interconnectedness of family, school, and community dynamics in shaping the overall student-teacher relationship.

Middle School Leadership

School leaders play an essential role in creating a successful middle school environment. Leadership significantly impacts both the school as an organization and student learning (Leithwood, 2011). Leithwood identifies four core transformational leadership practices essential in any context: setting directions, improving the instructional program, developing people, and aligning the organization. These practices are not limited solely to the school principal and may be widely distributed throughout the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004). Distributive leadership, defined as when “initiatives or practices used to influence members of the organization are exercised by more than a single person” (Leithwood et al., 2004), relies on a complementary hierarchical structure of leadership. While implementing distributed leadership requires time and resources, principals who consistently adopt this framework foster trust, empower teachers by increasing their self-efficacy, and enhance school culture (DeMarco & Gutmore, 2021). Williams and Burgess (2025) emphasize the importance of principal preparation specific to middle school principals, noting that many states lack specific

credentialing requirements for middle school principals, leading to the recommendation for an increase in mentorship and leadership development specific to the needs of middle school.

Middle school leaders must create and support organizational structures that foster meaningful relationships and maximize purposeful learning (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Successful middle schools are characterized by interdisciplinary teams, common planning time, flexible schedules, and intentional groupings of students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Leadership in these schools is informed and collaborative, promoting a shared vision, professional learning, and student-centered policies (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Middle school leaders must be developmentally responsive and aware of adolescents' development stages to support learner's growth (Williams & Burgess, 2025). Leaders who prioritize relationships understand that building culture requires more than a focus on data; it also involves attending to the identities and experiences of teachers and students (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). A study by Faulkner et al. (2023) found that both teachers and principals rank trusting relationships, supportive environments, and valuing young adolescents as key components for sustaining positive middle school culture. Essential responsive leadership practices for middle school leaders include being responsive to the development of the young adolescent students, the faculty, and the school itself (Rheume et al., 2021).

Moreover, successful middle school leaders actively promote diversity and inclusivity as part of a schoolwide commitment to culturally responsive practices. Leaders who prioritize these values influence teacher perceptions and foster environments that embrace diversity, leading to sustainable cultural change (Boudreaux, 2024).

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on School Culture

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted students' educational experiences, particularly during periods of distance learning. Across a variety of populations, findings related to the COVID-19 pandemic have shown the difficulties of distance from peers and teachers for young people during COVID-19 distance learning (Benner et al., 2024; Maiya et al., 2021; Swartz & Benz, 2021).

For example, students noted a decline in their sense of school bonding during the pandemic, with many self-reporting reduced quality of interaction with teachers in virtual classrooms compared to in-person learning (Benner et al., 2024; Swartz & Benz, 2021). This diminished connection with teachers may have long-term effects on students' academic performance and learning trajectories (Swartz & Benz, 2021). Similarly, peer interaction, which is essential for fostering school connectedness, was negatively affected, leading to a broader decrease in school culture (Swartz & Benz, 2021). Adolescents from marginalized backgrounds, such as racially minoritized students, those from low socioeconomic households, and students with special needs, were particularly vulnerable to these challenges, experiencing exacerbated declines in school-based relationships and academic performance (Benner et al., 2024).

The pandemic also led to significant challenges for educators and school leaders. Principals highlighted issues such as low student participation, fear of the pandemic, polarization, lack of socialization, and increased teacher workload as factors contributing to a decline in school culture (Brion & Kiral, 2022). Teachers echoed these concerns, noting that the negative impacts on school climate during this time influenced their consideration of leaving the profession (Gillani et al., 2022). These disruptions were compounded by evidence that students with higher household incomes and more parental involvement were better able to maintain

school bonding, while those facing high stress or financial hardships saw greater declines (Maiya et al., 2021). These findings underscore the complex impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational environments, revealing disparities in student outcomes and the broader implications for school culture.

Chapter Summary

The review of the literature on student-teacher relationships considered three areas: impact, development, and influencing factors of student-teacher relationships. This synthesis shows the widespread impact of such relationships on academic achievement, student motivation, well-being, social-emotional development, teacher job satisfaction, and the broader school culture. The research demonstrates the role of positive student-teacher relationships in fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment while also digging into the strategies, factors, and interventions that influence their development. Factors that impact student-teacher relationships that are explored are teacher expectations, bias, power dynamics, classroom climate, and collaboration with parents, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these elements in shaping student-teacher relationships.

The impact of positive student-teacher relationships influences academic achievement, student motivation and engagement, student well-being and social-emotional development, teacher job satisfaction, and overall school culture (Aldrup et al., 2018; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Krane et al., 2016; Poulou, 2017; Roorda et al., 2017; Sainio et al., 2023). Research highlights the correlation between high-quality relationships and positive academic outcomes, emphasizing the importance of warmth, high expectations, and understanding in their development (Hattie, 2012). Conversely, negative relationships can detrimentally affect student achievement over time (Roorda et al., 2017). These positive connections extend beyond

academics, influencing students' motivation, engagement, and overall well-being (Roorda et al., 2017; Sainio et al., 2023; Scales et al., 2020). Students with solid ties to teachers demonstrate higher levels of engagement, willingness to work, and interest in subjects (Sethi & Scales, 2020). Additionally, positive student-teacher relationships contribute to social-emotional development, creating a safe and caring learning environment associated with lower levels of bullying victimization, increased emotional literacy, and support during school transitions (Forsberg et al., 2022; Longobardi et al., 2019).

Teacher job satisfaction is linked to perceptions of student-teacher relationships, with positive relationships mediating the negative impact of student misbehavior on teacher well-being (Aldrup et al., 2018). Teachers with positive relationships experience lower emotional exhaustion, increased enjoyment, and enhanced self-efficacy (Taxer et al., 2018). Positive relationships empower teachers to respond to problematic behavior through restorative conversations, moving away from disciplinary systems and exclusionary measures (Anyon et al., 2018; Audley, 2020). The influence of student-teacher relationships extends to shaping overall school culture. Positive relationships enhance students' sense of belonging to the school and its community, promoting inclusivity and challenging negative perceptions (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019). School leaders recognize the impactful role of strong relationships in shaping the general climate of their buildings and contributing to lower suspension rates (Anyon et al., 2018). A school culture guided by a value system focused on responsibility to relationships over order maintenance fosters conflict resolution, trust, and positive relationships throughout the school community (Lustick, 2021).

Developing positive student-teacher relationships involves various strategies, including classroom interventions, restorative practices, social-emotional competence, communication, and

cultural competence (Aruta et al., 2019; Collins & Landrum, 2022; Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lustick, 2021). Preventative strategies and interventions, such as Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR), contribute to improved relationships, especially for students with initially low-quality connections (Duong et al., 2018). Restorative practices shift the focus from punitive consequences to meaningful relationships, fostering community within the school environment (Lustick, 2021). Social-emotional competence is essential, requiring training for teachers to implement strategies effectively (Legette et al., 2022; Poulou, 2017). Effective communication, both casual and problem-solving, create meaningful connections, while cultural competence ensures that relationships are authentic, respectful, free from stereotypes, and inclusive (Aruta et al., 2019; Krane et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Williams et al., 2019).

Several factors impact student-teacher relationships, including teacher expectations, bias, cultural differences, power dynamics, classroom climate, and the collaboration between parents and teachers (Gaias et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2017; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Johnston et al., 2023; Krane & Klevan, 2019; Liang et al., 2020). When communicated positively, high teacher expectations contribute to positive relationships and academic success (Williams et al., 2019). Addressing biases and cultural differences is necessary, as these factors influence interactions with students from diverse backgrounds (Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Owens, 2023; Townsend Walker, 2020). Balancing power dynamics, creating a comfortable classroom climate, and fostering collaboration between parents and teachers all play essential roles in shaping positive student-teacher relationships (Audley, 2020; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Krane & Klevan, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Liang et al., 2020). Recognizing the interconnectedness of these factors is crucial for fostering a supportive educational environment that nurtures positive and impactful student-teacher relationships.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The impact of positive student-teacher relationships is seen across a school, including in academic achievement and social-emotional development of students, job satisfaction of teachers, and overall school culture (Aldrup et al., 2018; Anyon et al., 2018; Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017). Teachers' cultural competence in building and sustaining relationships is especially beneficial for students from historically marginalized groups when teachers have a different background than students (Gregory et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Owens, 2023; Townsend Walker, 2020). It is essential for school leaders to create structures for teachers to successfully enhance relationships with students. Collaboration, reflection, and purposeful dialogue are structures that lead to new learning and transformation of perspectives (Mezirow, 2001; Saavedra, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This case study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

Chapter 3 describes the study's research design, context of the study, data collection methods, and data analysis processes and addresses the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is informed by constructivism and the idea that individual beliefs and knowledge are based upon experiences and that a person's reality is defined by context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). A key aspect of qualitative research is that it describes, explains, and communicates a complex social or cultural phenomenon through discovery and exploration (Bloomberg, 2023). Qualitative research relies on rich descriptions of the context, participants, and processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative research approach focuses on the participants' perspectives and a thorough understanding of the research's setting (Bloomberg, 2023). The purpose of the present case study was to understand the connected experiences of teachers as they develop relationships with students and how leaders create an environment that enhances positive student-teacher relationships in the context of Carson Johnson Middle School.

A qualitative research approach was selected for the case study because of the importance of the participants' context and perspectives in the research implementation. Identifying and implementing strategies for enhancing relationships was informed by the co-constructed meaning

of the experiences of the action research design and implementation teams. The action research team used methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations to explore the building and sustaining of positive student-teacher relationships at CJMS and how that impacted classroom environments and school culture.

Other studies have used qualitative research design to describe student and teacher perspectives, including the nuance of the context and perspectives of those involved. A study by Warren et al. (2022) offers a critical analysis of three teachers' dispositions. It includes student discussion of specific behaviors and qualities of teachers with whom they reported positive relationships (Warren et al., 2022). Anyon et al. (2018) conducted a study using interviews and focus groups to identify strategies for relationship-building used in low-suspending large urban schools. This study analyzed the perspectives of teachers focused on building positive relationships to enhance the classroom environment and school culture in the context of Carson Johnson Middle School.

Overview of Action Research Methods

Action research is a type of qualitative research that seeks explicitly practical solutions to practice-based problems in the local context (Given, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). At its core, action research is conducted by a research team within their context with the primary goal of improving practice by implementing a new strategy or intervention and documenting its impact (Corey, 1954). Corey describes the results of action research as meaningful because the results come from life-like circumstances. The inductive and evolving nature of action research as a type of qualitative research leads to holistic findings and is deeply rooted in the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Action research is an iterative cycle that evolves as the research team identifies a problem, plans and implements an intervention, and collects and analyzes data about the intervention (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a collaborative and reflective process, the action research team then uses the data collected to plan the next cycle.

Through the action research progress, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) worked collaboratively to study the building and sustaining of positive student-teacher relationships at Carson Johnson Middle School and how that impacted classroom environments and school culture. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) at CJMS and the researcher implemented cycles of action research focusing on the importance of reflection, communicative learning, and discourse through the Theoretical Framework of Transformative Learning theory (Mezirow, 2001; Saavedra, 1996). Action research was appropriate for this study because collaborative action research focuses on inquiry to address a common problem of practice (Calhoun, 1993). Engaging in action research, especially within urban settings such as CJMS, requires reflection by the research team on their biases (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2007).

Action Research Design

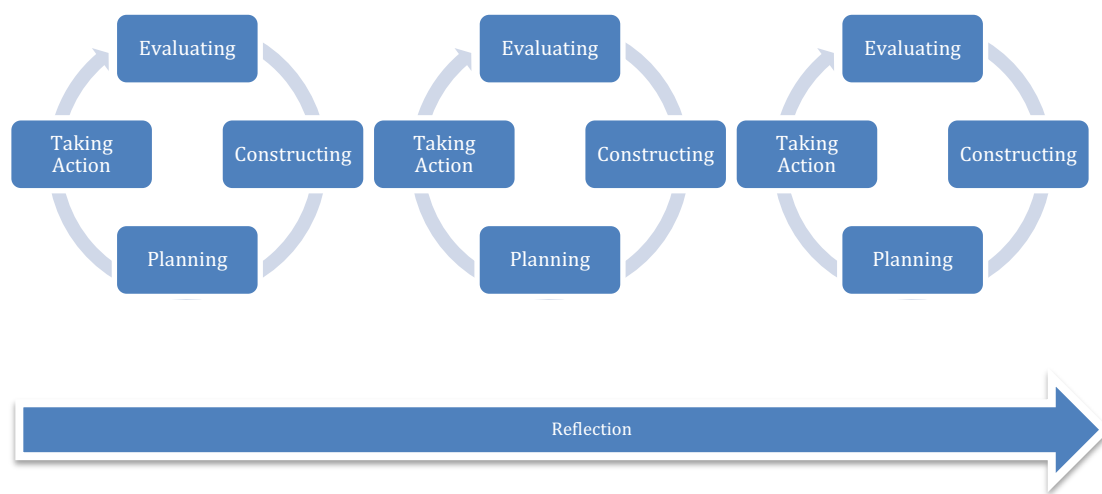
Educational change occurs when practitioners develop new practices that draw upon the knowledge gained through inquiry (Corey, 1953). The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) engaged in cycles of action to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships at Carson Johnson Middle School. The cycles of reflection embedded within action research allowed the ARDT to analyze the implementation of strategies and the reflection of the participants to design the next steps.

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

Action research is cyclical and consists of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2006). Corey (1954) defines action research in education as “research undertaken by practitioners in order that they may improve their practice” (p. 375). Action research is spiraling, consisting of multiple cycles that occur one after another (Coghlan, 2019). Each cycle builds upon the reflection from the previous cycle, as depicted in Figure 3.1. These iterations were used to understand the participants' experiences and the structures supporting the building and sustaining of student-teacher relationships.

Figure 3.1

Spiraling Nature of Action Research Cycles



Adapted from Coghlan (2019)

In this study, the logic model defined the cycles and provided structure for the Action Research Design Team.

Logic Model

This study was based on the idea that teachers must determine the need for change (unfreeze), engage in reflection, discourse, and action (change), and have leadership support as

the change is solidified (refreeze) (Kuhn, 1951). The logic model for this study, shown in Figure 3.2, was built on the theory that for change to happen in teacher practices, there must be support from leaders as new ideas are implemented (Kuhn, 1951).

Figure 3.2

Logic Model for the Study



Note: Adapted from Lewin (Kuhn, 1951)

Transformative Learning theory, as defined by Mezirow (1997) and Saavedra (1996), informed the theoretical framework for the study. Transformative Learning theory centers around the idea that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information (Mezirow, 1997). As the Action Research Implementation Team engaged in reflection, communicative learning, and discourse, new knowledge was generated, leading to perspective transformation and action based on the new information. Reinforcement from leadership and the support of schoolwide structures during the implementation of new action supported sustained change as teachers “refreeze.”

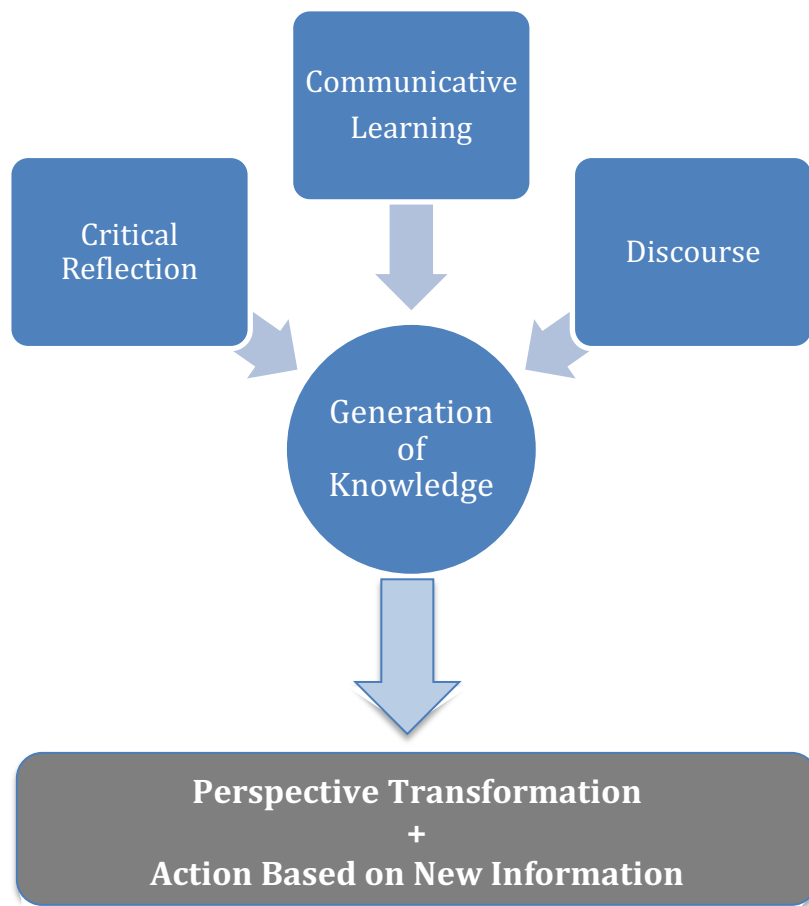
Theory of Change

Supporting the logic model is the theory of change based upon the ideas of constructivism. Individual knowledge and meaning are based on experience and are socially constructed (Vygotsky, 1978). Action research is based on the idea that practitioners must recognize the validity of their own knowledge and familiarity within a particular context (Efron & Ravid, 2020). In this study, the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) reflected upon their own experiences and discussed the experiences of others while implementing strategies for

building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships at the recommendation of the ARDT, as shown in the Theoretical Framework depicted in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3

Theoretical Framework for the Study



Note: Adapted from Mezirow (2001) and Saavedra (1996)

The new knowledge generated based on the experiences of the Action Research Implementation Team led to a change in practice by capitalizing on the necessary conditions for transformative learning – a focus on members’ cultural backgrounds, the necessity of dissonance, and the need to act on new ideas to validate new beliefs (Saavedra, 1996).

The Case

The present research used case study design to understand teachers' experiences at a single middle school as they implemented strategies to enhance student-teacher relationships through reflection on their practice. A case study, as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), is an “in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). Case studies are characterized by the researcher being the primary instrument of data collection within a bounded system using an inductive investigative strategy and where the study results in a detailed depiction of outcomes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Limiting the case ensures a focused approach and clearly defines the scope of the study.

Using multiple data sources creates a complete understanding of the phenomena and interventions within the context of the study. The research was bounded as a case of the experiences of teachers and leaders at Carson Johnson Middle School as they participated in the Action Research Design Team to enhance student-teacher relationships. The overall goal of the research was to examine teachers' perspectives on how leaders can enrich school culture by building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships. The results of action research are practical and immediately relevant to improving practice (Bauer & Brazer, 2012). Action research considers the unique context of the study, and the conclusions are situated within the complexities and nuances of the setting (Anderson et al., 2007). Because action research is conducted within a specific context, it provides evidence of whether the interventions accomplished the team's goals (Corey, 1954). In this study, teachers and leaders implemented and reflected on structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships to enhance school culture.

The Action Research Design Team

Action research is collaborative and relies on participants working with one another to improve practice (Mertler, 2006). It is essential that the action research team is comprised of people who will be directly affected by improvements to the current situation (Corey, 1954). The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) was comprised of the primary researcher, a teacher, and practitioners, as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team Members

Team Member	Primary Role at Carson Johnson Middle School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Assistant Principal	Leads and conducts all research with the action research design team for data analysis. Brings 15 years of middle school experience, 5 of which is as an administrator.
Marcus Frenchman	Restorative Coordinator	Provides 10 years of experience at CJMS, 4 of which have been in the role of Restorative Coordinator and 6 as a classroom teacher.
Dominic Matthews	Restorative Practices consultant with Ellington School District	Provides over 20 years of experience in restorative practices, including 4 years as a school-based administrator and 7 years working directly with CJMS.
Samantha Brown	PBIS Coach & 6 th Grade Teacher	Provides over 20 years of experience teaching in various roles, including 2 years as PBIS Coach and 5 years in 6 th grade.

The primary researcher was an assistant principal at CJMS and had a vested interest in creating structures to enhance student-teacher relationships. Mr. Frenchman was the restorative coordinator at CJMS and had ten years of experience at the school. His primary role as the restorative coordinator at the school focused on strengthening relationships, facilitating restorative interventions when harm occurred, and implementing schoolwide practices that promote community and positive relationships. His knowledge was critical in the development of interventions. Mr. Matthews was instrumental in the initial implementation of restorative practices at CJMS and has worked with the school in various capacities for the last seven years. Additionally, his experiences across the Ellington School District, in non-school settings with adult learners, and his prior role as an administrator provided a valuable voice. Ms. Brown provided teacher leader perspectives to the team in addition to her experience as the schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Coach. Ms. Brown served on both the Action Research Design Team and the Action Research Implementation Team.

The Action Research Design Team was chosen for their experiences, leadership, and knowledge. The ARDT designed the interventions to address the need to enhance the capacity of teachers to form positive relationships with students to impact school culture positively. The ARDT worked alongside the researcher and the Action Research Implementation Team.

Action Research Implementation Team

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was comprised of 6th-grade teachers on two interdisciplinary grade-level teams, a gifted teacher and a connections teacher, as shown in Table 3.2. The teachers were asked via letter and an introductory meeting in August 2024 to participate in this study, which occurred during the 2024-2025 school year. The goals of the research were outlined in addition to the benefits to teachers, including the optional nature of the

study and the ability to discontinue participation at any time. The ARIT was designed to include at least three of the four teachers on two different interdisciplinary teams. Including teachers and administrators together in action research creates powerful partnerships to lead school improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Table 3.2

Action Research Implementation Team

Team Member	Primary Role at Carson Johnson Middle School	Teaching Experience
Darla Emerson	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Science	11 years
Michelle Morrison	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Math	1 year
Jessica Marshall	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Social Studies	6 years
Tamara Bostick	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Science	9 years
Samantha Brown	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Social Studies	23 years
Monique Willis	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Math	14 years
Chase Williams	6 th Grade Teacher / Gifted	11 years
Anthony Thomas	6 th – 8 th Connections Teacher / Orchestra	3 years

Research Plan and Timeline

Glanz (2014) describes the timeline for action research as reflective action where continuous reflection and action result in long-term change. The timeline in Table 3.3 outlines the cycles of reflection and action that were used in the study. The timeline took place in the fall of the 2024-2025 school year.

Table 3.3*Action Research Timeline*

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
August 2024	- Identified team members - Secured consent to participate in research study	- Initial recruitment email sent - Identified team members - Secured consent to participate in research study
September 2024	- Initial ARDT meeting - ARDT intervention planning meetings - Artifacts collected	- Initial focus groups with ARIT - Action Research Cycle 1 and intervention implemented - ARIT PLC meeting
October 2024	- ARDT meeting - Artifacts collected	- Action Research Cycle 2 and intervention implemented - ARIT PLC meeting
November 2024	Artifacts collected	Continued implementation of Action Research Cycle 2 intervention
December 2024	- ARDT meeting - Artifacts collected - ARDT focus group	- Continued implementation of Action Research Cycle 2 intervention - ARIT PLC meeting - Final individual interviews

Context of the Study

Ellington School District is in the southeastern region of the United States. The school district is situated in a geographically small county; however, it is in the top 25 counties when

ranked by population, with a population density of around 1,000. Ellington School District is an urban characteristic district, meaning it is not located in a big city, but experiences challenges associated with urban contexts (Milner, 2012). For example, at the time of the study, the community that Ellington School District served had an increasing population of English language learners, had high poverty rates compared to the state, and many experienced resource scarcities. It is essential in contexts with urban characteristics to approach research with care. Milner (2012) describes this as the design and implementation of “studies that maintain scholarly rigor and, simultaneously, be responsive to the interests and needs of populations and environments that have been traditionally exploited, misrepresented, and underserved.”

At the time of the study, Ellington School District had fourteen elementary schools, four middle schools, two traditional high schools, two early learning centers, one alternative placement secondary school, and a Career Academy. In addition to the public schools in the Ellington School District, there were at least six private schools, some with religious affiliation, a STEM-focused school, and multiple Montessori schools. The county in which the school district is situated was home to four colleges or universities, including a major research institution at the time of the study. During the 2024-2025 school year, Ellington School District had a total student body of approximately 12,000 students and 2,700 staff, 1,200 of which were teachers. The student demographics in Ellington School District historically do not align with the county's demographics. At the time of the study, students in Ellington School District were 48% African American, 25% Hispanic, 21% Caucasian, 4.6% Multi-Racial, and 1.3% Asian compared to the county demographics of 28% African American, 11% Hispanic, 55% Caucasian, 3% Multi-Racial, and 4% Asian.

During the 2024-2025 school year, Carson Johnson Middle School was one of the four middle schools in the Ellington School District. CJMS had a student population of approximately 700 students with a faculty of approximately 70 teachers at the time of the study. The student population at CJMS in the 2019-2020 school year was 815 students and had dropped to approximately 650 in the fall of the 2024-2025 school year. The decrease was more significant than the national enrollment decrease of 4% in K-8 from 2019 to 2020, which is attributed in part to the COVID-19 pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Carson Johnson Middle School is in the middle of the city, near many businesses and, most notably, up the street from a major research university. The surrounding area that makes up the school's attendance zone includes some of the most historically affluent neighborhoods in the county and multiple government-subsidized housing communities. This disparity in income levels leads to a school population representing two very different communities. Due to the high poverty levels in the district, Ellington School District started offering free school meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) of the National School Lunch Program in 2015 and continued through the time of the study, and, therefore, did not have free and reduced lunch numbers to report. A state profile report of Ellington School District from State Connection Partnership (2021) found that the county that the district serves had 27.3% of children living in poverty in 2019 compared to a state rate of 19.5%. The same report stated that 44.1% of families with children in the county had annual incomes less than 150% of the federal poverty threshold compared to 28.1% statewide.

Student Body Characteristics

Carson Johnson Middle School brings together students from four elementary schools. The student population at CJMS during the 2024-2025 school year was 46% Black, 35% White,

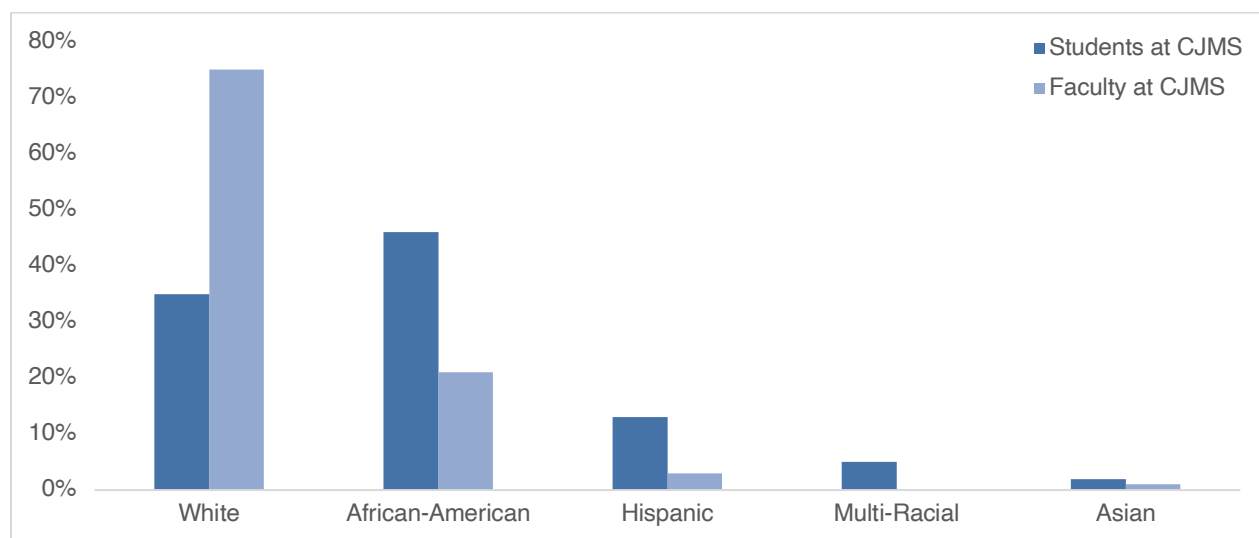
13% Hispanic, 5% Multi-Racial, and 2% Asian. There was a growing population of English language learners at CJMS, with this group of students doubling in the two years prior to the study. In the 2024-2025 school year, students receiving services through Special Education made up 17% of students. This included students with disabilities who are served through the Adapted Curriculum program, who made up 2% of students at CJMS.

Staff Characteristics

Historically, the demographics of the Carson Johnson Middle School students and faculty differ, especially when comparing African American and White populations, as shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4

Student and Faculty Demographics at Carson Johnson Middle School for 2024-2025



Of the classroom teachers at CJMS at the time of the study, 35% had ten or more years of experience, and almost all of this group of teachers had spent their entire career at CJMS. Comparatively, 60% of classroom teachers were in their first six years, with 30% in their first three years. Almost half of the teaching staff in their first six years were either enrolled in or had recently completed an alternative preparation program, meaning that they earned a teaching

degree in a non-traditional fashion while working at CJMS. Most of the teachers at CJMS who were working through or completed an alternative certification program had limited time and experience with students before they chose to go into teaching after earning an undergraduate degree in another field. Teachers who desired to become certified through an alternative preparation program typically went through the program while teaching, leading to much on-the-job learning. Teachers from alternative preparation programs are less prepared for the emotional demands of teaching and are often not prepared to provide high-quality instruction (Rose & Sughrue, 2021; Stark & Koslouski, 2021).

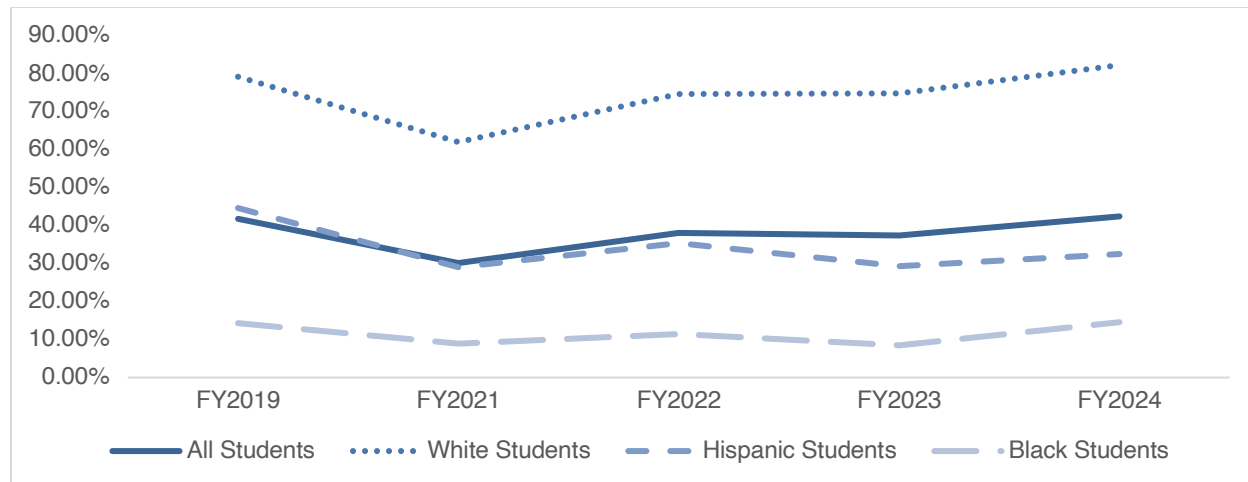
Academic Achievement

Over the twenty years prior to the study, Carson Johnson Middle School consistently performed the highest academic proficiency of the four middle schools in the Ellington School District. However, the school had not had proficiency rates above 50% since the state implemented the most recent standardized assessment system in 2015. While CJMS was focused on increasing academic proficiency for all students in English language arts and mathematics at the time of the study, there was an urgent need to focus on the performance of Hispanic students and Black students. The overall performance data of students at CJMS for the five years prior to the study did not reflect the disparity in data at CJMS. Black students and Hispanic students had proficiency rates well below White students at Carson Johnson Middle School, and there was a notable disparity between Hispanic students and Black students. The disparity is demonstrated in 3.5 and Figure 3.6. There was a drop in the performance of all students after the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall performance data showed growth toward the pre-pandemic numbers, but this was not true for Black and Hispanic students until 2024, as shown in Figure 3.5 and Figure 3.6. Both subgroups saw a decline in ELA performance from 2022 to 2023. Black students had

growth in proficiency in 2024, with an increase of proficiency from 8.5% in 2023 to 14.6% in 2024, surpassing pre-pandemic numbers by a small amount. Hispanic students were the only subgroup to not exceed pre-pandemic proficiency in 2024.

Figure 3.5

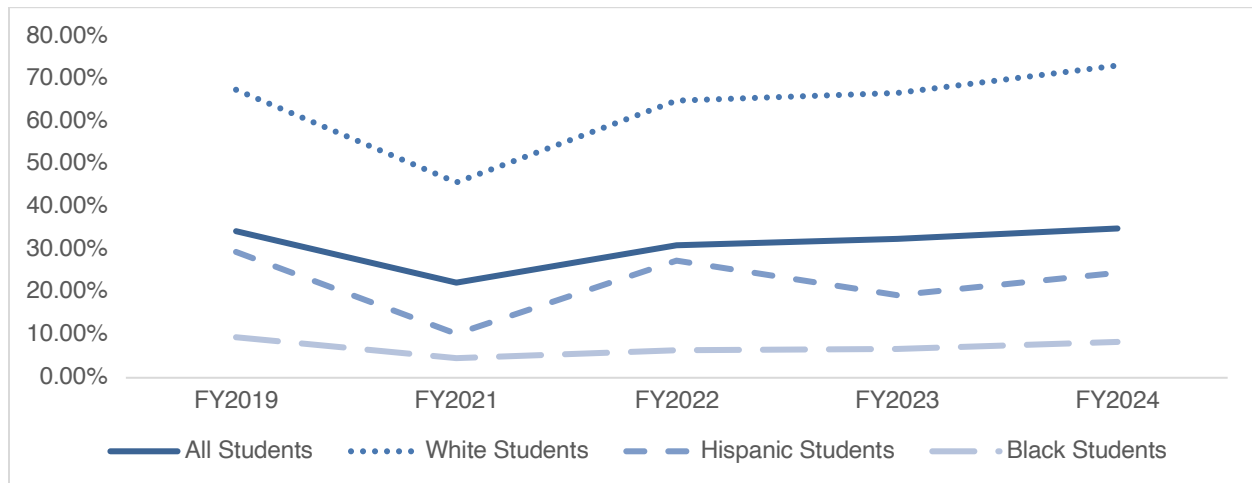
English Language Arts Proficiency by Race as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 3.6

Mathematics Proficiency by Race as Measured by the State Assessment System

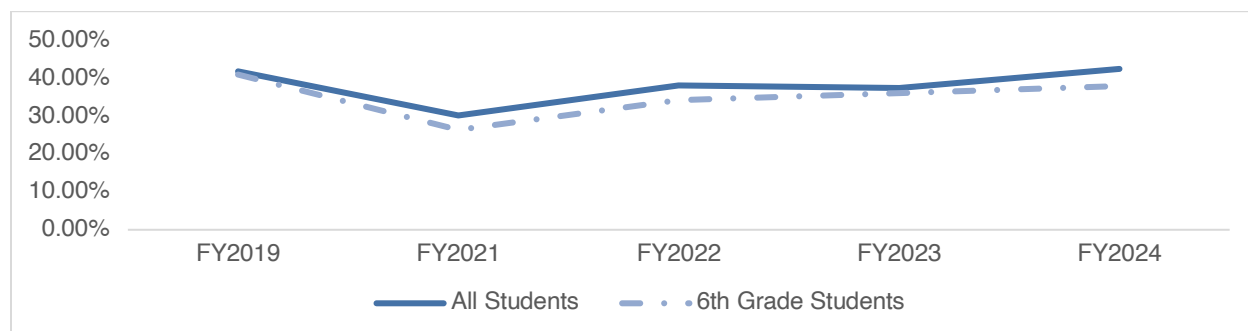


Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The study focused on 6th grade students at Carson Johnson Middle School. For the five years prior to the study, 6th grade students showed lower proficiency in English language arts and mathematics as measured by the state assessment system as shown by Figure 3.7 and Figure 3.8. The disparity in performance was greater for mathematics, as demonstrated in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.7

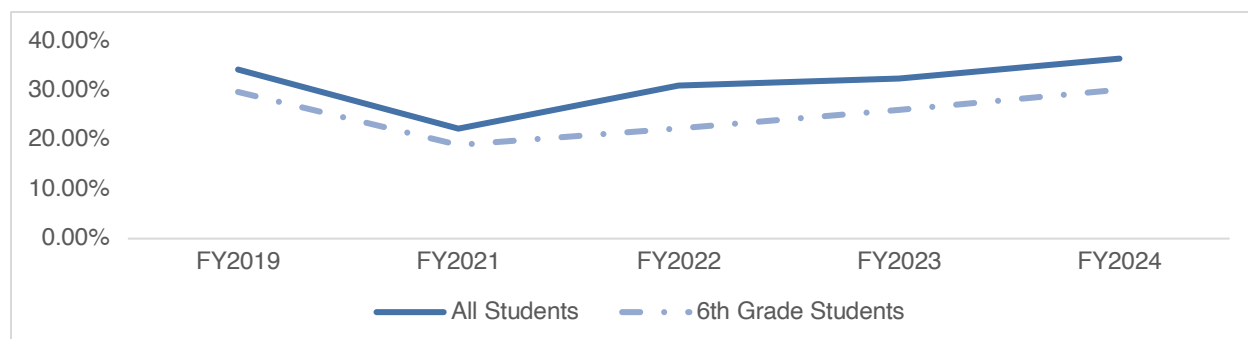
English Language Arts Proficiency by Grade Level as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 3.8

Mathematics Proficiency by Grade Level as Measured by the State Assessment System

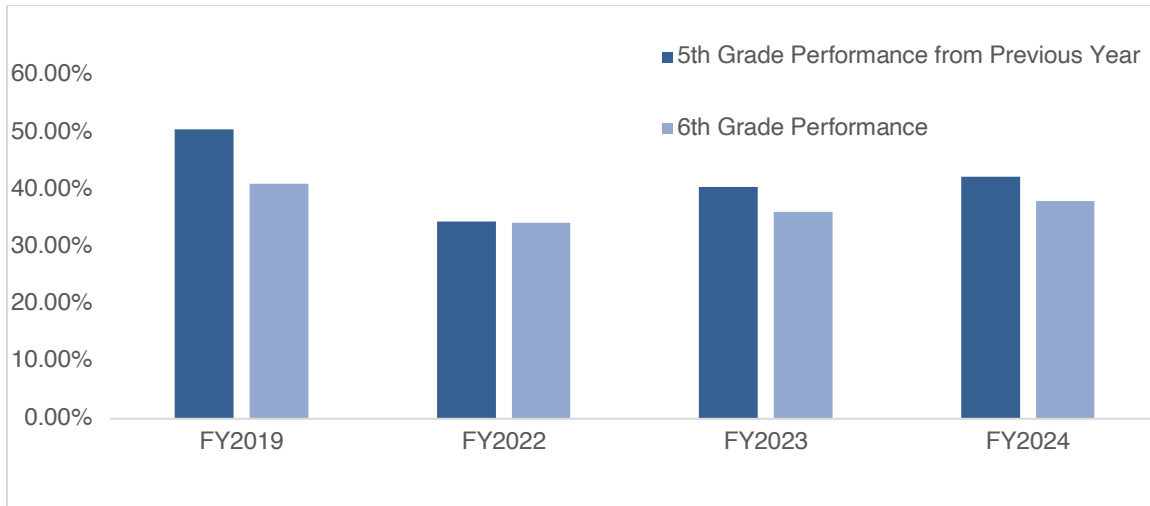


Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Additionally, there was a drop in cohort performance from 5th to 6th grade, the transition year from elementary to middle school in Ellington School District as shown in Figure 3.9 and Figure 3.10. Not accounting for enrollment changes, which was an average loss of 38 students per cohort, there were significant drops in proficiency in both English language arts and mathematics.

Figure 3.9

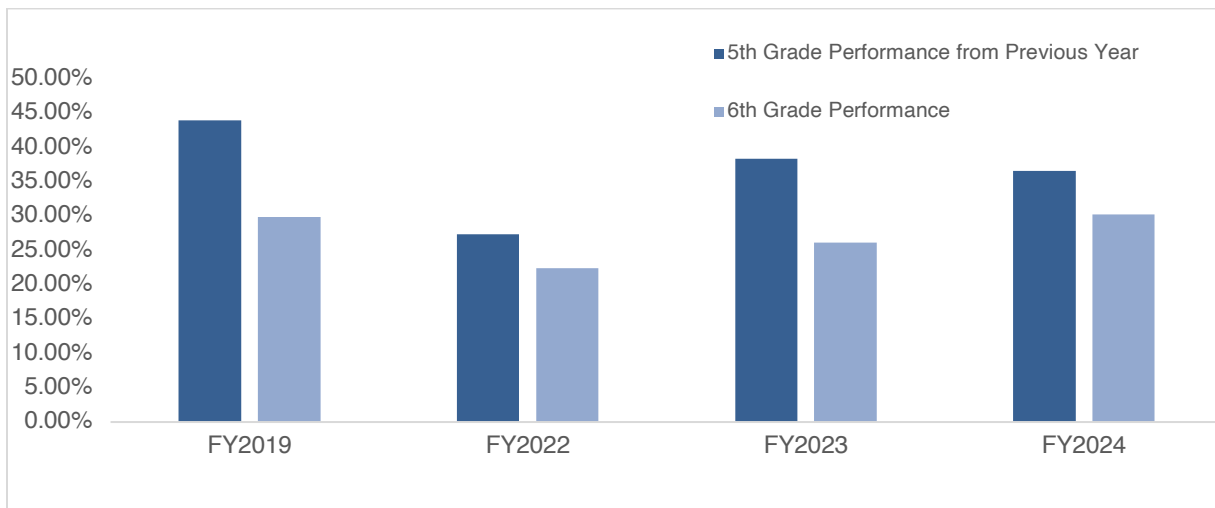
English Language Arts Cohort Proficiency as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 3.10

Mathematics Cohort Proficiency as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. 2024 mathematics data were not released by the state Board of Education due to the implementation of new standards.

School Climate and Discipline Data

Carson Johnson Middle School received a three-star rating for school climate in 2018 and 2019; these were the last two years of data prior to the study due to the state's pause on climate ratings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state climate rating was based on four components: student, teacher, and parent perceptions of a school's climate, student discipline, a safe and substance-free learning environment, and school-wide attendance. The lowest scoring areas for CJMS were student, teacher, and parent perception and student discipline. Specifically, the survey data from student perception had low point values. Historically, CJMS had discipline data that were disproportionate to the student population, with Black students receiving the most discipline referrals. In response to the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline, Carson Johnson Middle School's faculty made the decision to begin to implement Restorative Practices in the 2016-2017 school year. The continued implementation and growth of Restorative Practices at Carson Johnson Middle School highlighted a long-time focus on the importance of relationships. One of the key structures of Restorative Practices is the use of restorative circles to build community and repair harm. CJMS also focused on the implementation of restorative conversations between teachers and students and implementing consistent use of restorative language throughout the school community. With the implementation of Restorative Practices district-wide starting in 2018, there had been a documented decrease in office discipline referrals (ODR) and exclusionary discipline responses. However, there is still a high disproportionality in referrals and exclusionary discipline. In 2024, 83% of office discipline referrals were referrals for Black students, and Black students comprise 45% of the student population. Black students made up 84.6% of students assigned out of school suspension (OSS) and 81.9% of students assigned in school suspension (ISS). Based on a state climate survey in 2023-2024, approximately 73% of students at CJMS felt connected to school.

Data Sources

The disparity in academic achievement and discipline data between student subgroups at CJMS, paired with the demographic mismatch and relative lack of experience of the teaching staff at CJMS, increased the need for structures focused on enhancing student-teacher relationships. Varying data sources were used to identify the needs of teachers and plan interventions.

Participants

The participants in this study were eight teachers at Carson Johnson Middle School. The teachers taught 6th grade – six were a part of two different interdisciplinary teams in 6th grade, one supported Gifted students on both of the interdisciplinary teams, and one taught a connections class to 6th grade students. The participants had varying levels of teaching experience ranging from one to 25 years. The relationships between students and teachers are critical, especially in middle school, where the student-teacher relationship quality has more potential for a positive impact on performance than in high school (Sethi & Scales, 2020). Positive student-teacher relationships minimize problem behaviors and enhance interventions' effectiveness (Anyon et al., 2018).

Selection Criteria

This study used a purposeful sampling procedure due to its focus on enhancing positive student-teacher relationships at Carson Johnson Middle School. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is appropriate when the study aims to understand and gain insight into participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). All 6th grade teachers received invitations to participate in the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). The researcher highly encouraged participation from teachers on the same interdisciplinary teams. The ARIT had

representatives with varying years of teaching experience, content areas, and perceptions of the impact of student-teacher relationships. The final sample size depended on the number of teachers who met the conditions and agreed to participate.

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) provided information about how interventions to enhance positive student-teacher relationships impacted them individually and at Carson Johnson Middle School. The following section details the data collection methods used in this action research study.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, the researcher is immersed in the context and is heavily involved with participants within their world (Bloomberg, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher is deeply embedded in the work and must rely on the data collected, which requires reflexivity. Bloomberg (2023) defines reflexivity as a “deep awareness on the part of researchers of their preconceptions and assumptions, and reflection on their roles and emerging understandings while engaged in the research process” (p. 275). This study was a descriptive case study because the interventions were described within the real-life context in which they occurred (Yin, 2003). In descriptive case studies, it is essential to collect and analyze data from different perspectives (Yin, 2003). The various data collection methods provided a rich description necessary for qualitative research, specifically a descriptive case study.

Data collection for this study included the following qualitative methods:

- 1) Semi-structured interviews with individual participants at the end of the study;
- 2) Focus group conducted at the end of the study with the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and at the beginning of the study with the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT);

- 3) Observations of Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) meetings and Action Research Design Team (ARDT) meetings;
- 4) Researcher journal notes based on observations of meetings, including reflexive notes to document thoughts and reactions of the researcher;
- 5) Documents and artifacts from prior to the study and created during the study to provide context about the study's focus were used to corroborate observations and other data.

Patterns in the data were analyzed through the lens of the research questions to identify themes. Triangulation of data increases credibility by using multiple perspectives for mutual confirmation of data and ensuring that all aspects have been explored to enhance the quality of the research and minimize bias (Bloomberg, 2023).

Interviews

Interviews were used to collect data because of the ability of an interview to lead to thick descriptions, an essential component of qualitative research (Bloomberg, 2023). Semi-structured interview protocols allowed the researcher to follow up with probing questions and prompts. Individual interviews with the Action Research Implementation Team took place at the study's end to understand participants' views on student-teacher relationships and the impact of implemented interventions. Additionally, the interview allowed the researcher to understand the participants' perspectives on how leaders support teachers in the building and sustaining of positive student-teacher relationships.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted focus groups with the ARIT at the beginning of the study and with the ARDT at the end of the study. The goal of the ARIT focus groups was to understand

participants' views on student-teacher relationships and their impact on their classrooms and school culture. The focus group conducted at the end of the study with the ARDT was designed to elicit viewpoints about the impact of the study. A focus group was selected as the method for data collection because it allows for the group's interactions to add to the richness of the responses by fostering dialogue among the team (Bloomberg, 2023). A focus group discussion creates conditions for participants to agree or disagree with one another while refining their thoughts (Bloomberg, 2023). Data from focus groups can highlight similarities and differences among participants, adding credibility to findings (Hays, 2023). Specifically, the focus groups were asked how leaders support student-teacher relationships and provide structures to enhance school culture through positive relationships.

Observation Notes

The researcher conducted observations of ARIT meetings, ARDT meetings, and intervention implementation. Observations document interactions in a natural context (Bloomberg, 2023). Observation notes allowed the researcher to document participants' behaviors and interactions. The researcher used a two-column approach, as described by Mertler (2017), that allowed the researcher to simultaneously document observation notes and commentary. When conducting observations, it was essential to recognize the researcher as both a participant and an observer.

Researcher's Journal

The researcher's journal included observation notes in addition to reflexive notes to document the researcher's thoughts and reactions. The researcher kept notes from meetings with the Action Research Implementation Team and the Action Research Design Team and when

observing interventions. With the researcher as the primary driver of data collection and analysis and a participant in qualitative research, reflexivity was crucial (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Documents and Artifacts

Documents from participants' daily work, some that pre-date the study and others current to the study, were used as a data resource. The artifacts were used with other data collection methods to provide a complete view of the participants' experiences and triangulate the data. Documents and artifacts were also used to provide more background for the values and beliefs of the participants in the setting (Bloomberg, 2023).

Interventions

Action research consists of multiple cycles, with each cycle defined by the process of constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action (Coghlan, 2019). A significant component of action research studies is the employment of interventions. Interventions are defined by Glanz (2014) as “any instructional practice, program, or procedure that is implemented by a researcher in order to investigate its effect on the behavior or achievement of an individual or group” (p. 316). The interventions were determined by the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and based on the previous cycles. It was essential to action research that the ARDT drove the process alongside the researcher. As the research moved through the cycles, adjustments were made based on previous cycles.

The purpose of the study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships. This action research study involved two cycles. Each cycle included intervention, observation, and data collection. The interventions supported the needs of the teachers in the PLC. Data was collected on each implemented intervention to describe the impact.

The interventions listed in Table 3.4 were designed and implemented by the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT).

Table 3.4

Interventions for the Study

Action	Intervention	Monitoring Strategy	Timeline
Research Cycle			
1	Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR)	Observations, meeting notes, group reflections, artifact collection	September 2024 to October 2024
2	- Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) - Professional Learning Community (PLC)	Observations, meeting notes, group reflections, artifact collection	October 2024 to December 2024

The researcher and the Action Research Design Team collected data to describe the impact of interventions. The researcher analyzed the data to develop themes and thick descriptions.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis is defined by Merriam (1998) as the process of making sense of the data and making meaning through consolidation, reduction, and interpretation of what has been said, observed, and read. The organization and analysis of data allow the researcher to find patterns, themes, and relationships (Glanz, 2014). Data collection and analysis happen simultaneously in qualitative research, with preliminary analysis leading to changes in future research cycles (Merriam, 1998).

Coding

Reducing data collected as part of the inductive process of analyzing qualitative data involves organizing the data into themes and patterns (Mertler, 2016). Developing a coding scheme reduces and groups the data by forming codes or categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used coding to make meaning of the data collected. A sample of codes, their meanings, and data examples are outlined in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5

Code Sampling of Data

Code	Meaning	Data Sample
LTW	leaders and teachers working together	“Communication, that's the biggest thing. It's teachers communicating their needs to admin, admin communicating their needs to teachers. Just always staying in the loop with each other.” – Ms. Marshall in her final interview sharing how leaders support her relationships with students in the classroom
CC	classroom community	“If everybody feels like they're a community and like there's a positive vibe towards the teacher, then you can joke, and you can have that community.” – Ms. Brown in a PLC meeting when describing how relationships impact the classroom community
RH	repairing harm	“One is I apologize. I make mistakes all the time, even times where I am clearly frustrated, and in my mind, I understand exactly what happened and exactly where the gap was between what I wanted and what I saw, creating a space to just be like, hey, what was happening today, what was going on really helps me.” – Mr. Williams in a focus group explaining one way he builds relationships with students through repairing harm and open communication

Thematic Analysis

The process of thematic analysis makes sense of data and provides meaning to the reader based on patterns and themes anchored in shared ideas and concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2006) define the six phases of thematic analysis as familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to thematic analysis that utilizes the researcher's subjectivity and insight as a key to quality analysis, emphasizing researcher reflexivity through journaling and reflection while recognizing the researcher's influence on the study (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Thick description, in conjunction with coding and thematic analysis, creates a depiction with a level of detail showing that the researcher's conclusions make sense and are credible (Merriam, 1998). This study utilized reflexive thematic analysis and triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

This study used multiple data sources, data types, and methods for data analysis. Criteria for addressing trustworthiness in a qualitative study are credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Bloomberg, 2023). The credibility of a study describes whether the findings are accurate and measure what it reports to measure (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Triangulation is essential because it demonstrates credibility, and it occurs when the researcher compares and cross-checks data collected from multiple sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2017).

Throughout the study, member checking occurred to ensure the researcher accurately interpreted the meaning of what participants said in interviews and focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additional strategies for ensuring trustworthiness included prolonged

engagement, persistent observation, and thick description (Mertler, 2017). Confirmability in qualitative research is defined as having findings that represent the participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thorough observation notes of ARIT and ARDT, triangulation, thick description, and member checking ensured confirmability. Reflexive journaling throughout the study allowed the researcher to consciously critique and evaluate their role in the research process and accurately reflect the participants in the study. Table 3.6 presents triangulation through both the data collection method and analysis method in relation to the research questions.

Table 3.6*Connecting Data Collection to the Research Questions*

Research Question	Method of Data Collection	Method of Analysis	Approximate Collection Timeline
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August 2024 December 2024
	Interviews	Coding/Analysis of Themes	December 2024
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	Ongoing through December 2024
	Participant Observations	Researcher Reflection	Ongoing through December 2024
RQ2: How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August 2024 December 2024
	Interviews	Coding/Analysis of Themes	December 2024
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	Ongoing through December 2024
	Participant Observations	Researcher Reflection	Ongoing through December 2024
RQ3: How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?	Focus Group	Coding/Analysis of Themes	August 2024 December 2024
	Researcher Journal Notes	Researcher Reflection	Ongoing through December 2024
	Document Analysis	Coding/Analysis of Themes	Ongoing through December 2024

Thick descriptions of the study's context and data collection methods create the opportunity for readers to see how the study fits within their situation, providing reader

generalizability to other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although qualitative research is context-specific, it can apply to broader contexts through the depth of information from multiple data sources, rich descriptions, and purposeful sampling (Bloomberg, 2023).

Subjectivity Statement

Qualitative research positions the researcher as the primary method of data collection, and the researcher's characteristics may influence the interpretation of the findings (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The researcher served as an administrator at Carson Johnson Middle School during the study and has been a part of the CJMS community for over a decade.

Reflexivity is the process of the researcher identifying how the researcher and the research process are impacted by the researcher's beliefs, biases, and dispositions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher kept a research journal throughout to capture accuracy of the process and attempt to address researcher subjectivity.

Limitations

Qualitative research has built-in limitations but is uniquely suited to conduct research in intricate social settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Many of the limitations of the study arose from the nature of qualitative research and the context of the study. The study was conducted over a short period of time; if the timeline was longer, it could increase implementation and create additional data and reliability of the findings. The researcher served as a participant-observer, increasing the amount of researcher subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The researcher held a position of power within the school and in relation to the participants as an administrator in the school building. Although participation was voluntary, the positional power of the researcher limits the findings. The findings of this research study included data collected

from one urban-characteristic middle school in the Southeast region of the United States. This limits the transferability to other schools and districts.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the data collection and analysis methods for this action research study. Action research was the preferred qualitative method because of the iterative cycles that evolve as the research team collects and reflects upon data. School leaders and teachers worked together to identify problems, implement interventions, and reflect on practice. Data sources included interviews, focus groups, observational data, researcher reflections, and various documents and artifacts. The interviews with the teachers were primarily used to understand the participants' perspectives on how leaders support teachers in building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships. Focus groups aimed to capture perspectives on the impact of these relationships on classrooms and school culture. The researcher's journal documented the ongoing analysis process. All data collected were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns relating to student-teacher relationships.

The next chapter of this dissertation presents the findings of the study at Carson Johnson Middle School, along with detailed descriptions of intervention strategies and the iterative cycles of action research implemented through the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

It is essential for school leaders to create structures for teachers to successfully enhance relationships with students. Positive student-teacher relationships significantly influence students' school experiences, enhancing academic achievement, engagement, social-emotional development, and classroom behavior (Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Strati et al., 2017). During the transitional middle school years, these relationships are especially crucial, helping students adapt to new environments and navigate the challenges of school-to-school transitions (Longobardi et al., 2019). When schools prioritize fostering relationships, leaders observe a notable improvement in school culture (Lustick, 2021). Teachers can proactively strengthen student-teacher relationships by employing targeted strategies to build positive connections (Augustine et al., 2018; Collins & Landrum, 2019; Duong et al., 2018). Key elements such as collaboration, reflection, and intentional dialogue promote new learning and the transformation of perspectives (Mezirow, 2001; Saavedra, 1996). For these efforts to succeed, school leaders must establish structures that support teachers in enhancing relationships with students.

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from

teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

Chapter 4 explores the context of the study and findings from this case study. Problem-framing in the context of Carson Johnson Middle School, the site of the action research, is included. The chapter details the story of the action research and its outcomes. The findings from this case are presented through a description of the action research cycles and data collection methods, including focus groups and interviews. Additionally, the researcher details the alignment between the research questions and theoretical framework.

Context of the Study

Carson Johnson Middle School is a diverse school in the southeastern region of the United States. Although it is not situated in a major city, the school operates within an urban-characteristic district, experiencing challenges often associated with urban educational contexts (Milner, 2012). For example, at the time of the study, the community that CJMS served had an increasing population of English language learners, had high poverty rates compared to the state, and many experienced resource scarcity. CJMS had a student population of approximately 700

students with a faculty of approximately 70 teachers at the time of the study. CJMS is one of four middle schools in Ellington School District.

During the 2024-2025 school year, the student population at CJMS school year was 46% Black, 35% White, 13% Hispanic, 5% Multi-Racial, and 2% Asian. However, the demographic composition of the faculty historically misaligned with that of the student body, particularly concerning Black and White populations. While 46% of students were Black, only 21% of the faculty identified as Black. Conversely, 35% of the students identified as White, compared to 75% of the faculty.

Of the approximately 70 teachers, 60% were in their first six years, with 30% in their first three years. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent virtual learning significantly affected teacher development, particularly for those early in their careers. Teachers with five years of experience in the 2024-2025 school year were operationally equivalent to third-year teachers in terms of professional growth, highlighting a continued need for induction-level support.

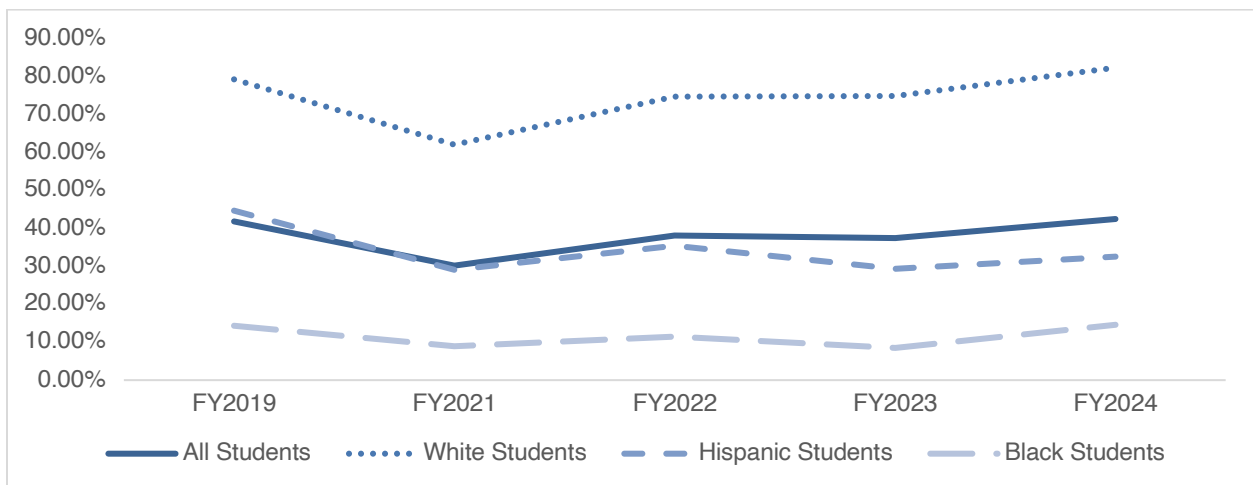
While CJMS maintained a focus on increasing academic proficiency for all students at the time of the study, there was an urgent need to focus on the performance of Hispanic students and Black students. Black students and Hispanic students had proficiency rates well below White students at CJMS, and there was a notable disparity between Hispanic students and Black students. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the achievement gap between subgroups cannot be understated.

Although overall student performance began rebounding toward pre-pandemic levels, this was not the case for Black and Hispanic students. In 2024, Black students showed notable progress, with proficiency rates increasing from 8.5% in 2023 to 14.6%, surpassing pre-pandemic levels by a small margin. However, Hispanic students remained the only subgroup

whose proficiency rates had not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The trends in data are shown in Figures 4.1 and 4.2. In response, CJMS set school goals for the 2024-2025 year to sustain and build upon the upward trend in academic performance, with a specific focus on historically underserved student groups.

Figure 4.1

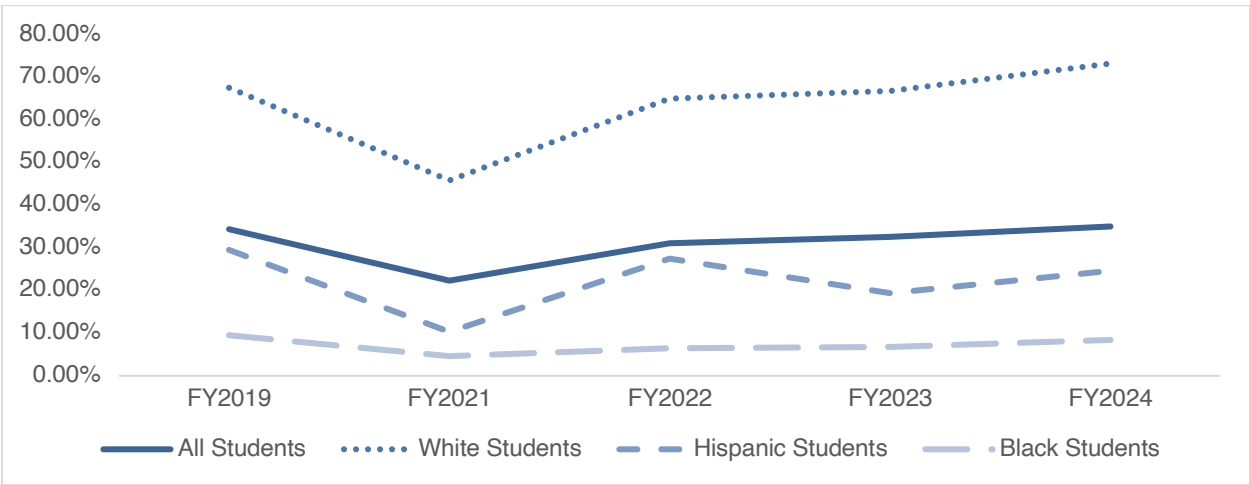
English Language Arts Proficiency by Race as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 4.2

Mathematics Proficiency by Race as Measured by the State Assessment System

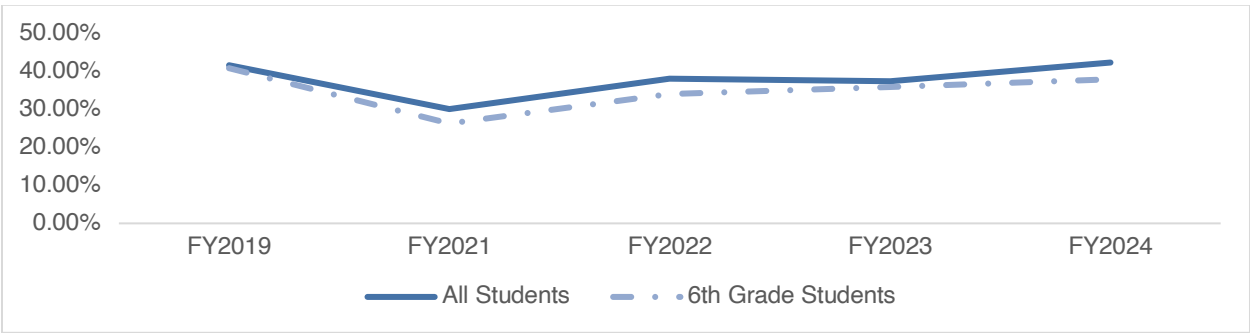


Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The study focused on 6th grade students at Carson Johnson Middle School. For the five years prior to the study, 6th grade students showed lower proficiency than the overall school as measured by the state assessment system as shown by Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.3

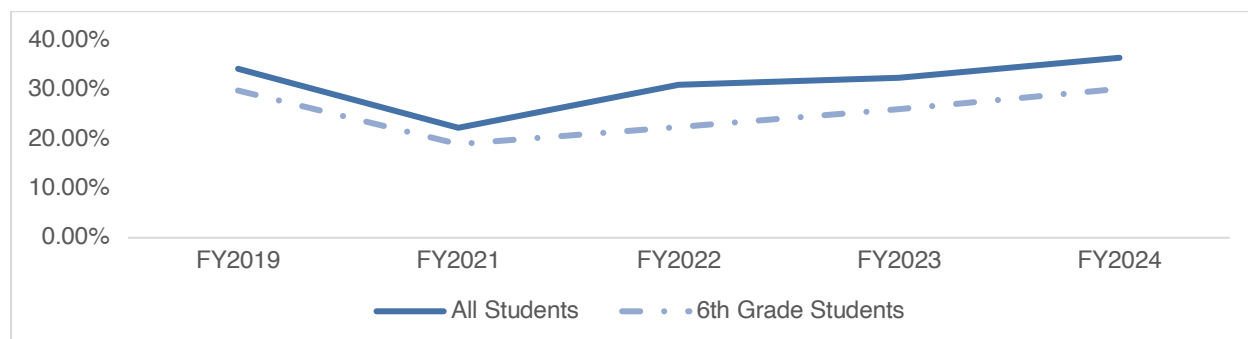
English Language Arts Proficiency by Grade Level as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 4.4

Mathematics Proficiency by Grade Level as Measured by the State Assessment System

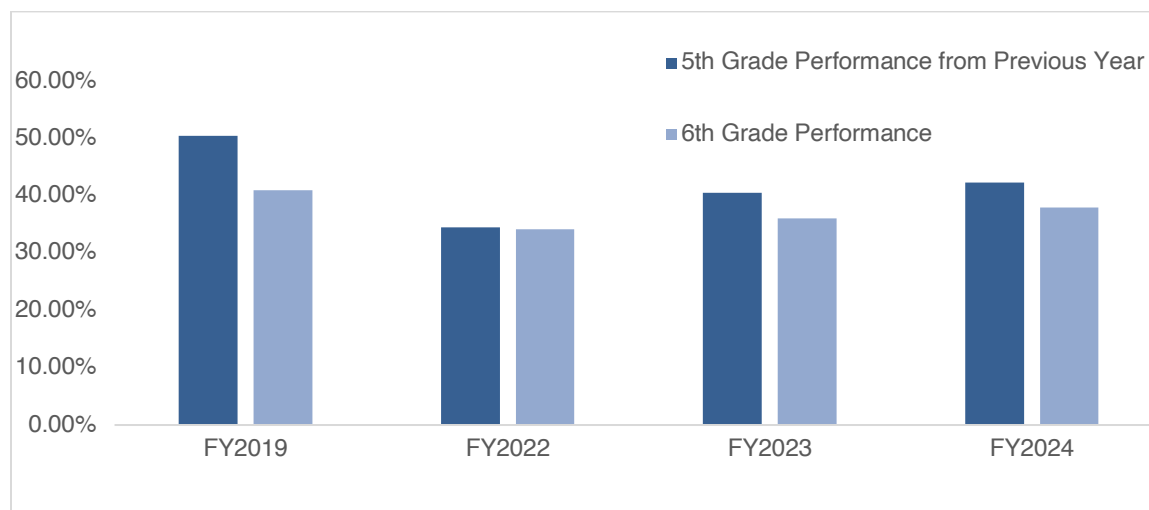


Note: In 2021, only 34% of students at CJMS participated in state testing. There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The urgency to focus on 6th grade is emphasized by the drop in cohort performance from 5th to 6th grade, which is the transition year from elementary to middle school in Ellington School District. There were significant drops in both English language arts and mathematics, with higher drops in mathematics as shown in Figure 4.5 and 4.6.

Figure 4.5

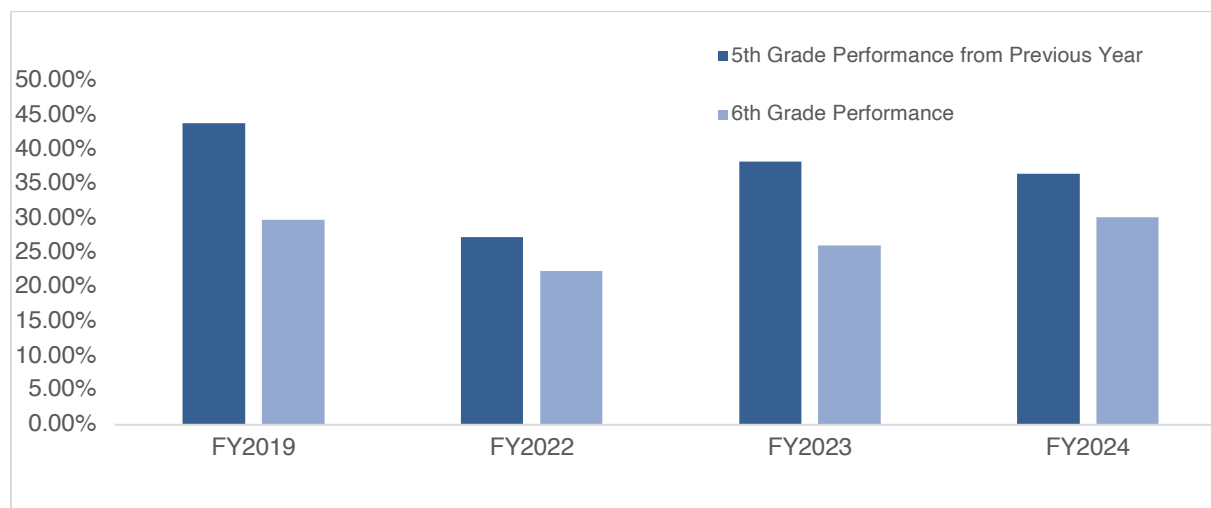
English Language Arts Cohort Proficiency as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Figure 4.6

Mathematics Cohort Proficiency as Measured by the State Assessment System



Note: There was no state testing due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. 2024 mathematics data were not released by the state Board of Education due to the implementation of new standards.

Historically, CJMS had discipline data that was disproportionate to the student population, with Black students receiving the most discipline referrals. In response to the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline, Carson Johnson Middle School’s faculty made the decision to begin to implement Restorative Practices in the 2016-2017 school year. The continued implementation and growth of Restorative Practices at Carson Johnson Middle School highlighted a long-time focus on the importance of relationships.

With the implementation of Restorative Practices district-wide starting in 2018 after being introduced at Carson Johnson Middle School in 2017, there had been a documented decrease in office discipline referrals (ODR) and exclusionary discipline responses. However, there was still a high disproportionality in referrals and exclusionary discipline. In the 2023-2024 school year, 83% of office discipline referrals were referrals for Black students, and Black students comprised 45% of the student population. Black students made up 84.6% of students

assigned out-of-school suspension (OSS) and 81.9% of students assigned in-school suspension (ISS). The implementation of Restorative Practices at Carson Johnson Middle School highlighted a long-time focus on the importance of relationships at CJMS. Based on a state climate survey in 2023-2024, approximately 73% of students at CJMS felt connected to school.

Action Research Design Team (ARDT)

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) guided the study and designed the interventions based on research and the data from participants to enhance the capacity of teachers to form positive relationships with students to impact school culture positively. The Action Research Design Team was chosen for their experiences, leadership, and knowledge. The ARDT members are outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1*Action Research Design Team Members*

Team Member	Primary Role at Carson Johnson Middle School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher	Assistant Principal	Leads and conducts all research with the action research design team, for data analysis. Brings 15 years of middle school experience, 5 of which is as an administrator.
Marcus Frenchman	Restorative Coordinator	Provides over 10 years of experience at Carson Johnson Middle School, 5 of which have been in the role of Restorative Coordinator.
Dominic Matthews	Restorative Practices consultant with Ellington School District	Provides over 15 years of experience in restorative practices, including 4 years as a school-based administrator and 5 years working directly with CJMS.
Samantha Brown	PBIS Coach & 6 th Grade Teacher	Provides over 20 years of experience teaching in various roles, including 2 years as PBIS Coach and 10 years in 6 th grade.

Individual Roles

Each member was essential to the Action Research Design Team. Both Marcus Frenchman, the CJMS Restorative Coordinator, and Dominic Matthews, the school district's Restorative Practices consultant, had extensive experience working directly with teachers and students to build and enhance positive relationships through restorative practices. Additionally, Marcus Frenchman's day-to-day interactions with students and teachers at CJMS allowed him to provide consistent and timely information and experiences to inform the work of the ARDT. The insights from Dominic Matthews and his experiences in schools across the Ellington School

District and in non-school settings with adult learners, coupled with his engagement with CJMS and restorative practices, provided a valuable perspective. Samantha Brown's role as both the PBIS Coach and a full-time classroom teacher in 6th grade provided the critical perspective of a current teacher. Because of the duality of her role at CJMS, Ms. Brown also served on the Action Research Implementation Team. The primary researcher served as one of the Assistant Principals at CJMS and had previously been a teacher and instructional coach at CJMS, providing an administrative perspective to the team. All members' long-time involvement with CJMS provided a historical context of the school and an understanding of the community within CJMS.

The design team planned each intervention based on iterative action research cycles and data. A sub-team of the design team facilitated the professional learning designed by the ARDT as the first intervention. The sub-team was composed of the primary researcher, Marcus Frenchman, and Samantha Brown. The experience of each member of this sub-team in previously facilitating professional learning at CJMS and the trusted relationships each had with the faculty created the conditions for participants to fully engage in the professional learning tasks.

Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was comprised of eight 6th-grade teachers at CJMS. The team consisted of teachers on two interdisciplinary grade-level teams, a Gifted teacher on the 6th-grade team, and a connections teacher. The ARIT was designed to include at least three of the four teachers from two of the school's 6th-grade interdisciplinary teams. Table 4.2 lists the members of the Action Research Implementation Team, their role at CJMS, and their teaching experience.

Table 4.2*Action Research Implementation Team*

Team Member	Primary Role at Carson Johnson Middle School	Teaching Experience
Darla Emerson	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Science	11 years
Michelle Morrison	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Math	1 year
Jessica Marshall	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1 / Social Studies	6 years
Tamara Bostick	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Science	4 years
Samantha Brown	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Social Studies	22 years
Monique Willis	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2 / Math	11 years
Chase Williams	6 th Grade Teacher / Gifted	10 years
Anthony Thomas	Connections Teacher / Orchestra	3 years

Action Research Cycle I and Intervention

Action Research Cycle I began in mid-September of 2024, lasted approximately six weeks, and concluded in mid-October of 2024. To examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school, the first action research cycle comprised of the following:

1. an initial focus group for the ARIT focused on student-teacher relationships;
2. meetings with the ARDT to plan the initial intervention;
3. a professional learning session with the ARIT to focus on a relationship-building framework;
4. implementation of the framework by research participants

Initial Focus Group

After informed consent was collected, the initial focus groups were held with the members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) at the beginning of Cycle I in

September of 2024. Focus groups were chosen to allow participants to build on one another's ideas. These focus groups were held in person at Carson Johnson Middle School (CJMS). The focus group participants were given two options of dates via Google Calendar, resulting in one focus group of six participants and one focus group of two participants as shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Action Research Implementation Team Initial Focus Group

Team Member	Role at CJMS	Date of Initial Focus Group
Darla Emerson	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	September 11, 2024
Michelle Morrison	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	September 11, 2024
Jessica Marshall	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	September 11, 2024
Tamara Bostick	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	September 11, 2024
Samantha Brown	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	September 11, 2024
Monique Willis	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	September 11, 2024
Chase Williams	6 th Grade Teacher / Gifted	September 12, 2024
Anthony Thomas	Connections Teacher	September 12, 2024

The primary researcher asked ten questions following a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The questions focused on teachers' descriptions of the relationships they build and sustain with students, the impact of those relationships, and the role of leaders in building and sustaining relationships with students. The final question of the focus group allowed participants the opportunity to share additional information about student-teacher relationships not directly asked about in the question set. The two focus groups participated in the same semi-structured interview protocol. The focus groups were recorded using a transcription application on the researcher's phone and computer to allow for greater accuracy. The researcher listened to each focus group while correcting any transcription errors made.

Each participant communicated their thoughts on the relationships they build with students, how those relationships impact their classroom and the school, and how leaders support or detract from those relationships. The primary researcher shared the data and analysis from the focus groups with the ARDT, and this data was used to plan the intervention for Action Research Cycle I.

Action Research Design Team Meeting

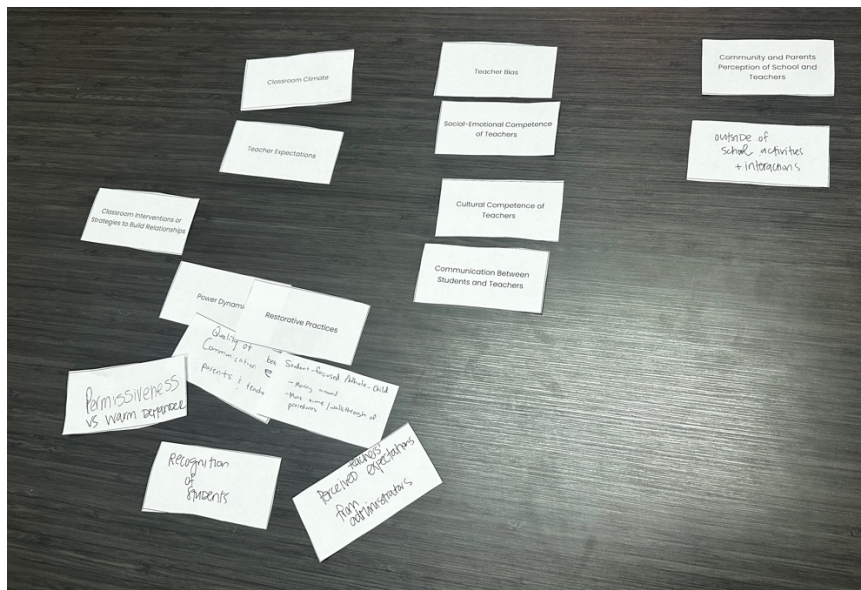
The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) held its initial meeting in mid-September of 2024. The meeting was held in person at Carson Johnson Middle School. Dominic Matthews, Samantha Brown, and the primary researcher were present for the duration of the meeting; Marcus Frenchman was present for the first half of the meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to plan the intervention for Cycle I. The ARDT meeting was recorded using a transcription application. The researcher listened to the transcription while correcting any transcription errors made. The researcher recorded notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

To intentionally plan for a focused intervention, the ARDT reviewed schoolwide data, including overall academic achievement, achievement gaps between subgroups, achievement disparities when comparing sixth grade to the school, differences in the racial makeup of the faculty compared to the students, discipline data by subgroups, and climate survey data. In addition to school-based data, the ARDT reviewed summaries of research showing that positive student-teacher relationships impact students' experience in schools in areas including academic achievement, engagement, social-emotional development, and behavior in the classroom as well as the impact student-teacher relationships have on overall school culture and discipline (Anyon et al., 2018; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017; Sethi & Scales, 2020; Strati et al., 2017).

With data as a foundation for the work, the ARDT engaged in an activity sorting research-based themes and concepts that impact student-teacher relationships, comparing them on a continuum of high-impact and within our control to low-impact and out of our control as shown in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7

Action Research Design Team Sort



Note. The photograph shows the ARDT sort of research-based themes and concepts that impact student-teacher relationships.

The ARDT used the discussion from the sorting activity and data analysis from the initial focus group to conclude that Cycle I should focus on a classroom-based intervention that focused on the skill of relationship building. The team selected the framework of Establish-Maintain-Restore (Duong et al., 2018) and decided to engage the implementation team through professional learning, reflection, and discussion.

Intervention for Action Research Cycle I

The primary intervention for Action Research Cycle I was for participants to learn about and implement a framework for building relationships in the classroom, Establish-Maintain-Restore (Duong et al., 2018). The design team decided that the professional learning topic aligned with the overall goals of the school, and it would be delivered to all teachers at CJMS. The primary researcher only recorded research journal notes pertaining to the observations and insights of the research participants.

The Action Research Design Team met to plan the initial professional learning. Based on the logic model Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze, the design team wanted to create initial professional learning that created the conditions for unfreezing current beliefs, incorporating components of both individual reflection and discourse about student teacher-relationship (Kuhn, 1951; Mezirow, 2001). These conditions were particularly important since the participants had varied levels of experience working with students ranging from a first-year teacher to a veteran of twenty-plus years. The ARDT created an agenda and resources for the initial professional learning and shared it with participants prior to the professional learning delivery.

The ARIT met for the professional learning on September 30, 2024. All the members of the implementation team attended and participated in the professional learning, and three of the four members of the design team facilitated the professional learning. The attending participants included Darla Emerson, Michelle Morrison, Jessica Marshall, Tamara Bostick, Samantha Brown, Monique Willis, Chase Williams, and Anthony Thomas. The professional learning focused on the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework for building and sustaining relationships with students (Duong et al., 2018). Teachers not participating in the research study were also present during the professional learning since it was delivered to the entire grade-level team. The

primary researcher only focused on participants when recording observations and notes in the researcher's journal.

Marcus Frenchman reviewed the purpose of the professional learning session and engaged participants in an opening activity designed to activate individual reflection and partner discourse about relationships. The facilitators then highlighted the intent of each phase of the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework and shared examples of ways to support student-teacher relationships within each phase. Participants then independently went through class rosters and identified the status of their relationship with individual students by identifying the phase of the framework they were currently in with each student. The researcher circulated during this independent activity, made notes of participants' categorizations, and asked questions to gain insight into participant thinking. The participants were candid in their explanations, revealing the challenge of time in establishing relationships with students and the impact of student behavior that caused the need to restore relationships that were not yet fully established. The researcher also noted the complexity that participants found when categorizing each student relationship. Participants used various strategies, including placing some students between phases, identifying where a student was using a continuum within each phase, and highlighting students that were looping between maintain and restore.

The professional learning concluded with a group discussion about how participants planned to engage with students in each phase, both at a general level and within interdisciplinary teams, talking about specific students. The ARDT tasked participants with utilizing the reflection and planning from the professional learning session to implement actions in their classes to continue to build and enhance relationships with students.

Participants were given an evaluation form to provide feedback about the professional learning in the session. The researcher recorded notes and reflections in the researcher's journal during and after the professional learning session. The Action Research Design Team used the feedback from participants, the researcher's journal notes, and their experience delivering the professional learning session to plan for Action Research Cycle II.

Action Research Cycle II and Intervention

Action Research Cycle II began in mid-October of 2024, lasted approximately eight weeks, and concluded in mid-December of 2024. To examine how school leaders can enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school, the second action research cycle comprised of the following:

1. meetings with the ARDT to plan the second intervention;
2. PLC meetings with the ARIT;
3. individual interviews with the ARIT;
4. a focus group of the ARDT at the conclusion of the study

Action Research Design Team Meeting

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) held a meeting in mid-October to plan for Cycle II. All members of the ARDT were present, and the meeting was held in a hybrid format, with the primary researcher and Samantha Brown attending in person and Dominic Matthews and Marcus Frenchman attending virtually. The ARDT meeting was recorded using a transcription application. The researcher listened to the transcription while correcting any transcription errors made. The researcher recorded notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

To continue with the cyclical nature of action research, the team first reviewed the feedback on the professional learning from the participants, the researcher's observations during the professional learning, and the experiences of the ARDT delivering the professional learning. Using the data from Cycle I as a foundation for Cycle II, the ARDT chose the Cycle II intervention of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) of the 6th-grade teachers focused on guided discourse and reflection.

Intervention for Action Research Cycle II

The Action Research Implementation Team met for their first PLC meeting within Action Research Cycle II in mid-October of 2024. Six of the eight members of the ARIT attended and participated in the PLC. The attending members included Darla Emerson, Michelle Morrison, Samantha Brown, Monique Willis, Chase Williams, and Anthony Thomas. Due to a conflict with scheduled off-site professional learning, Jessica Marshall and Tamara Bostick could not attend. The PLC met in person at Carson Johnson Middle School. The ARIT PLC meeting was recorded using a transcription application. The researcher listened to the transcription while correcting any transcription errors made. The researcher recorded notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

The Action Research Design Team chose to start the PLC with planned activities and prompts for critical reflection focused specifically on the participants' experience learning and implementing the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework (Duong et al., 2018). The ARDT intentionally planned for the initial whole-group discussion prompts to center around successes with the framework. The ARIT engaged in discussion about the stage(s) in which they found success, with which students they found success, and how the framework impacted how they thought about their relationships with students.

The second activity planned by the ARDT focused on partners within the PLC engaging in discourse and problem-solving about challenges they experienced. The ARDT intentionally planned for partner discussion instead of whole group discussion to increase equity of voice and provide individual feedback on challenges experienced by the participants. Partners took turns individually identifying a challenge they experienced with a student and together brainstormed how to overcome the identified challenge. After the paired discussion, the Professional Learning Community engaged in a whole-group discussion about what participants had put in place to enhance relationships at each phase of the framework and how schoolwide structures supported them in each phase of the framework.

The ARDT had planned for an additional activity sorting research-based statements about relationships into categories. During the PLC, the primary researcher realized that the rich discussion had taken more time than planned and made the decision to skip the sorting activity so as not to diminish the discourse and reflection. The initial PLC meeting concluded with a summarizing strategy of “What? So What? Now What?” where participants were asked to reflect individually by recording their answers to the following questions: what’s your takeaway, what’s the meaning of your takeaway, and what do you want to try next or do differently.

The Action Research Design Team met in early December to debrief and reflect on the initial PLC meeting. The meeting was held in person with the primary researcher, Marcus Frenchman, and Dominic Matthews attended virtually. Because Samantha Brown had a scheduling conflict during the design team meeting, she met individually with the primary researcher later in the afternoon to debrief the meeting. The design team meeting began with a review of the initial PLC meeting. The primary researcher explained the decision to skip the sorting activity, and the team reviewed the analysis of the initial PLC meeting. The ARDT

agreed that the PLC should engage in the originally planned categorization and sort activity at a future PLC meeting. The ARDT planned prompts for additional discourse focused on the maintenance of schoolwide structures and individual next steps.

The ARIT met on December 6, 2024, to continue the Cycle II intervention of the Professional Learning Community (PLC). Six of the eight members of the ARIT attended and participated in the PLC. The attending members included Darla Emerson, Michelle Morrison, Jessica Marshall, Samantha Brown, Chase Williams, and Anthony Thomas. Tamara Bostick and Monique Willis were not able to attend. The PLC met in person at Carson Johnson Middle School. The ARIT PLC meeting was recorded using a transcription application. The researcher listened to the transcription while correcting any transcription errors made. The researcher recorded notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

The PLC began with the open sorting activity planned by the ARDT. The group was given sixteen cards, each containing a research-based statement about student-teacher relationships. The participants sorted the statements into categories of their own choosing. The PLC engaged in rich discussion to decide on the categorization. After coming to a consensus on the sort, the PLC discussed connections to the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework and which statement resonated with them the most as teachers.

The whole-group debrief discussion planned by the ARDT focused on the support needed to maintain schoolwide structures and individual next steps through the lens of building and enhancing positive student-teacher relationships. Implementation team members were asked questions such as "What are your further needs for support in engaging in the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework for building and sustaining relationships with students?"

Interviews with the Action Research Implementation Team

Final individual interviews were held with the members of the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) at the end of Action Research Cycle II in mid-December. The primary researcher chose individual interviews to conclude the research study to allow individual participants the opportunity to reflect and share their experiences in a private setting. These interviews were held in person at Carson Johnson Middle School (CJMS). Interviewees chose an interview time from the timeslots provided by the primary researcher. The times and dates of the final interviews are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Action Research Implementation Team Final Individual Interviews

Team Member	Role at CJMS	Date of Final Interview
Darla Emerson	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	December 9, 2024
Michelle Morrison	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	December 11, 2024
Jessica Marshall	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 1	December 13, 2024
Tamara Bostick	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	December 13, 2024
Samantha Brown	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	December 11, 2024
Monique Willis	6 th Grade Teacher / Team 2	December 13, 2024
Chase Williams	6 th Grade Teacher / Gifted	December 19, 2024
Anthony Thomas	Connections Teacher	December 11, 2024

The primary researcher asked each interviewee eight questions following a semi-structured interview protocol. The full set of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The interviews were recorded using a transcription application on the researcher's phone. The researcher listened to each interview while correcting any transcription errors made. The primary researcher shared the transcriptions with individual participants to give the opportunity for participants to make corrections and provide any needed clarity. The interviews provided insight

into participants' perceptions of their relationships with students, their experiences within this research study, and the support school leaders provide in building and sustaining student-teacher relationships. The final question of the interview allowed participants the opportunity to share additional information not directly asked about in the question set.

Focus Group with the Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) participated in a focus group at the end of the study. The focus group was held on December 10, 2024, in person at Carson Johnson Middle School (CJMS). All members of the ARDT participated in the focus group. A focus group was chosen due to the ability of a focus group to promote candor, participation, and reflection and to allow opinions to be formed with the input of others (Vaughn et al., 1996).

The primary researcher asked six questions following a semi-structured interview protocol. The full set of questions can be found in Appendix B. The questions focused on design team members' descriptions of how leaders support the building and sustaining of student-teacher relationships, the impact of the interventions, their role in the research study, and the overall impact of the work of the design team. The final question of the focus group allowed participants the opportunity to share additional information not directly asked about in the question set. The focus group was recorded using a transcription application on the researcher's phone. The researcher listened to each interview while correcting any transcription errors made. The focus group provided valuable insight into the experiences of the Action Research Design Team members during this research study.

Action Research Team Artifacts

The primary researcher met with the Action Research Design Team and Action Research Implementation Team throughout the duration of the study. The Action Research Design Team

and Action Research Implementation Team used an adaptation of Transformational Learning Theory as the theoretical framework guiding the action research study adapted from Mezirow (2001) and Saavedra (1996). The Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze logic model informed the action research process and interventions (Kuhn, 1951).

The action research team artifacts include the theoretical framework and logic model. Other artifacts collected and created include transcribed focus groups, transcribed individual interviews, ARDT meeting agendas and transcriptions, ARIT meeting agendas and transcriptions, ARIT feedback questionnaire, and researcher's journal notes. Table 4.5 demonstrates the alignment between research questions, data sources, and the theoretical framework to inform the research study.

Table 4.5*Alignment of Research Questions and Data Sources to Theoretical Framework*

Research Question	Collected Data Sources	Alignment to Theoretical Framework
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?	Focus Group	Critical Reflection
	Interviews	Communicative Learning
	Researcher Journal Notes	Discourse
	Participant Observations	Generation of Knowledge
	Professional Learning Feedback	Perspective Transformation
		Action Based on New Information
RQ2: How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?	Focus Groups	Critical Reflection
	Interviews	Communicative Learning
	Researcher Journal Notes	Discourse
	Participant Observations	
RQ3: How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?	Focus Group	Critical Reflection
	Researcher Journal Notes	Communicative Learning
	Participant Observations	Discourse
		Generation of Knowledge

The continued analysis of the data and key findings led to the development of emerging themes, as outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in

a middle school. Perspectives were sought from 6th-grade teachers who teach different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams to describe how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, perspectives from teachers were included about how relationships impacted school culture. Teachers identified what schoolwide structures, and leadership moves supported the building and enhancing of positive student-teacher relationships.

This case study focused on two action research cycles and from the perspectives of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) and Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT). Each of the research cycles was designed based on data collected and analyzed by the ARDT.

Field notes and notes from the researcher's journal assisted in confirming the data. The researcher summarized the alignment between the research questions and theoretical framework. Analysis of data led to the development of emerging themes. Data analysis and thematic findings are outlined in the next chapter as they relate to the purpose of the study, the research questions, the logic model, and the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

Merriam (1998) defines data analysis as the process of making sense of data by consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what has been said, observed, and read. Organizing and analyzing data enables researchers to identify patterns, themes, and relationships (Glanz, 2014). In qualitative research, reducing data as part of the inductive analysis process involves organizing it into themes and patterns (Mertler, 2016). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), involves interpreting data to derive meaning through patterns and themes rooted in shared ideas and concepts. Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This study used thematic analysis and triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings.

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

This chapter presents the themes that resulted from data collection and findings throughout the action research cycles. The thematic findings relate to the purpose of the study, the research questions, the logic model, and the theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 previously outlined the action research cycles and data collection that took place from August to December during the 2024-2025 school year at Carson Johnson Middle School. Two action research cycles were completed, and data were gathered through focus groups, interviews, observational notes, the researcher's journal, and documents and artifacts. The cycles were used to research how intentional strategies for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships impacted the classroom environment and school culture, and how leaders facilitated support structures for student-teacher relationships.

To guide each cycle, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) utilized Lewin's Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze logic model (Kuhn, 1951). The theoretical framework of the study was based on an adaptation of Transformational Learning Theory adapted from Mezirow (2001) and Saavedra (1996). The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) implemented cycles of research focusing on reflection, communicative learning, and discourse leading to the generation of new knowledge and perspective transformation. Reinforcement from leadership and the

support of schoolwide structures during the implementation of new action supported sustained change as teachers “refreeze.”

Chapter 4 presented findings from the two action research cycles. Through a systematic coding scheme of the collected data, the researcher analyzed the overall data as related to each code and subsequently by research question.

Overview of Data Analysis

Initial focus groups were conducted with the Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT), consisting of eight teachers. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) met to discuss data collected during the focus groups and to design the implementation of interventions to enhance student-teacher relationships at Carson Johnson Middle School. Throughout the two cycles, the ARDT reviewed data collected to guide next steps. Data included focus groups, interviews, observational notes, the researcher’s journal, and documents and artifacts.

The primary researcher conducted individual interviews with the ARIT at the conclusion of the two cycles. The primary researcher selected individual interviews to provide space for ARIT members to share individual perspectives. The ARDT participated in a final focus group to share perceptions of the impact of the study.

The researcher listened to a recording of each interview and PLC meeting, corrected any transcription errors, and then reread and coded responses to the focus group questions. The researcher used an inductive analysis process, described by Mertler (2016) as organizing data into themes and patterns.

Findings

The researcher identified key findings using a coding process from data collected in interviews, focus groups, ARIT meetings, and ARDT meetings. By following a coding system,

the researcher reduced bias, improved trustworthiness, and enhanced triangulation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The findings were developed by analyzing the data during and after the study through thematic coding. The researcher's journal supported the findings from the coding process by providing supporting evidence for the findings. Table 5.1 shows major and minor codes that emerged during the process relative to each research question with the number of times the code appeared noted.

Table 5.1

Major and Minor Codes by Research Question

Codes	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Major Codes	Classroom Community (22)	Schoolwide Structures (35)	Schoolwide Structures (35)
	Focus on Individual Students (18)	Leaders Prioritizing Relationships (25)	Restorative Practices (schoolwide) (23)
	Repairing Harm (17)	Restorative Practices (schoolwide) (23)	
	Response to Direction (15)	Leaders and Teachers Working Together (20)	
	Behavior Impact (12)		
Minor Codes	School Community (11)	Restorative Practices (leaders) (11)	
	Academic Impact (10)	Leaders Relationships with Students (8)	
	School Participation (10)		
	Content-Specific Impact (8)		

Through the processes described, the researcher identified the following ten key findings:

1. A foundation of restorative practices increased teachers' engagement in and perceptions of the impact of strategies for building and sustaining relationships with students.

2. Teachers reported the intentional strategies for building relationships with students positively impacted the classroom community and increased student involvement.
3. Teachers indicated the intentional strategies for building relationships with students created the space for them to focus on individual students and be more aware of individual relationships.
4. When teachers reported a positive relationship with a student, they found that students were more likely to respond positively to redirection and more willing to repair harm.
5. Teachers noticed that students associated their relationship with their teacher with grades and academic struggles.
6. When leaders communicated a vision involving the importance of relationships, teachers felt empowered to prioritize relationships.
7. For relationships to have a positive impact on school culture, a focus on relationships needed to be embedded into a variety of schoolwide structures, and leaders needed to model positive relationships with students.
8. Open communication between leaders and teachers, especially around discipline and response to behaviors in the classroom, helped teachers sustain relationships with students.
9. Restorative practices being embedded in schoolwide structures created conditions for relationships to thrive and positively impact school culture.
10. The strategies provided a common language and have the potential to lead to a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.

The continued analysis of the findings led to the development of emerging themes. Themes in the data emerged related to each research question through combining and refining codes.

Multiple data sources were used to confirm themes, including interviews, focus groups, ARDT meetings, ARIT meetings, documents and artifacts, and the researcher's journal notes.

Triangulation is essential because it demonstrates credibility, and it occurs when the researcher compares and cross-checks data collected from multiple sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertler, 2017). The researcher shared findings and themes with the ARIT and ARDT to confirm recurring themes. A summary of the emergent themes aligned with the research questions is shown in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2

Summary of Themes Connected to Research Questions

Research Questions	Findings	Themes
RQ1: How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?	- Teachers stated the intentional strategies for building relationships with students created the space for them to focus on individual students and be more aware of individual relationships - When teachers reported a positive relationship with a student, they found that students were more likely to respond positively to redirection and more willing to repair harm. - Teachers noticed that students associated their relationship with their teacher with grades and academic struggles. - Teachers reported the intentional strategies for building relationships with students positively impacted the classroom community and increased student involvement.	An intentional focus on relationships fostered individual relationships and improved community.

Research Questions	Findings	Themes
RQ2: How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?	• When leaders communicated a vision involving the importance of relationships, teachers felt empowered to prioritize relationships. • Open communication between leaders and teachers, especially around discipline and response to behaviors in the classroom, helped teachers sustain relationships with students • For relationships to have a positive impact on school culture, a focus on relationships needed to be embedded into a variety of schoolwide structures, and leaders needed to model positive relationships with students. • Restorative practices being embedded in schoolwide structures created conditions for relationships to thrive and positively impact school culture.	Leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student teacher relationships.
RQ3: How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?	• A foundation of restorative practices increased teachers' engagement in and perceptions of the impact of strategies for building and sustaining relationships with students. • The strategies provided a common language and have the potential to lead to a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.	A foundation of restorative practices created the conditions for learning intentional strategies and moved toward a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.

Research Question 1

The first research question sought to further investigate the purpose of the study. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture? Findings related to Research Question 1 included:

1. Teachers stated the intentional strategies for building relationships with students created the space for them to focus on individual students and be more aware of individual relationships
2. When teachers reported a positive relationship with a student, they found that students were more likely to respond positively to redirection and more willing to repair harm.
3. Teachers noticed that students associated their relationship with their teacher with grades and academic struggles.
4. Teachers reported the intentional strategies for building relationships with students positively impacted the classroom community and increased student involvement.

Theme 1: An intentional focus on relationships fostered individual relationships and improved community.

At the beginning of the study, participants acknowledged the importance of relationships between students and teachers and their greater impact. When asked how relationships between teachers and students impact the classroom and school, Mr. Williams stated, “If we're doing a good job, we are building relationships with our students, and we want students who are going to make a positive change in our school and see themselves as part of a community.” The idea of community was mentioned frequently in initial focus groups. For example, Ms. Brown shared in the other initial focus group, “If everybody feels like they're a community and there's a positive vibe towards the teacher, then you can joke, and you can have that community.”

Teachers in initial focus groups highlighted the underlying practice of engaging in restorative practices and repairing harm, specifically explaining how positive relationships created the conditions for repairing the relationship and moving forward. Ms. Bostick shared, “We can have a negative interaction, but we always are able to have a conversation and always

come to an agreement, you know, or to a solution.” She attributed this to the positive relationships previously established with the students. Conversely, Mrs. Emerson attributed the ability to restore relationships to the foundation of positive relationships already established with the students; she noted, “They shut off a lot quicker, and are quick to divert, run away...it's over before it starts.”

After engaging in the first intervention of the study, the professional learning session focused on the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) framework, and the Professional Learning Community (PLC) conversations shifted more towards individual student relationships. As the study progressed, observations and data collected showed that there was a continued focus on individual students and the impact of improving individual relationships. While the idea of relationships improving the likelihood of a positive restorative conversation, the structure of the EMR framework helped teachers see the need to focus on individuals. When discussing the impact of improving individual relationships, Mrs. Emerson shared:

It made me realize that I think a lot of relationships come naturally to me, and so the ones that I was hitting restore with I never established with...Why isn't this working with this kid? And I realized, more often than not, that I never specifically established [a relationship] with them.

The idea of being intentional in establishing relationships with students recurred amongst teachers. The reflection about individual students led to changes in teachers' actions. Ms. Bostick shared that she was now, “more aware of and conscious of being more positive with certain individuals...I started engaging with them more.” While she often previously thought about the needs of a whole class, Ms. Brown noted that the reflection on individual relationships was useful because:

It definitely made me take stock and think individually about every student, and not just about classes or general thoughts about students. It was really helpful for me in making sure I knew in each class, who I wanted to focus on building a relationship with.

Ms. Brown continued that there was an impact of this individual focus, she stated, “I did notice a change, especially if something had to be corrected, or they had to take feedback, or even just a little more engagement in class.”

During a PLC discussion about how improving individual relationships impacted the classroom culture and the shared responsibility in the classroom, Mrs. Emerson stated, “We [the class as a whole] all help maintain these relationships, and we all have an impact on the stage that we’re in.” The impact of academic success, or students’ perception of academic success, was revealed as a commonality amongst teachers when referring to the focus on individual relationships. Teachers shared their perception that their students’ focus on academic success was connected to the fact that 6th grade is the first year that students receive numerical grades in Ellington School District after receiving standards-based grades through elementary school. Mrs. Willis said, “A lot of the behaviors I’m seeing in class from that student are due to this kind of negative association with their grade and just boosting that grade [through working individually with them] helped build that relationship.” Ms. Brown described a scenario where a student gave her a note that read, “I know you dislike me because I have a 33 in this class, and I don’t want to work anymore.” Because that student-teacher relationship was established, the student shared her concerns and opened the door for Ms. Brown to have a conversation with her about how to raise her grade, leading to a repair of the relationship and improved participation in class.

The feedback from the professional learning session, which was delivered to the whole faculty, showed that 100% of participants saw benefits from the learning. When reviewing the

feedback and notes from the professional learning with the Action Research Design Team, Mr. Frenchman noted, “I think the feedback on that PL showed that people valued it, people wanted that, that it helped people do something that mattered.” This was supported in final interviews when asked about the impact of the interventions. Mr. Thomas shared in his final interview that he, “found it incredibly helpful to have that reflection time, which we didn't in past years.”

The theme which emerged from Research Question 1 was an intentional focus on relationships fostered individual relationships and improved community. Whereas Research Question 1 sought to understand teachers’ perspectives on the impact of strategies for enhancing student-teacher relationships, Research Question 2 focused on leaders’ roles in building and sustaining student-teacher relationships.

Research Question 2

The second research question further articulated the purpose of the study. How do stakeholders describe leaders’ roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture? Findings related to Research Question 2 included:

1. When leaders communicated a vision involving the importance of relationships, teachers felt empowered to prioritize relationships.
2. Open communication between leaders and teachers, especially around discipline and response to behaviors in the classroom, helped teachers sustain relationships with students
3. For relationships to have a positive impact on school culture, a focus on relationships needed to be embedded into a variety of schoolwide structures, and leaders needed to model positive relationships with students.

4. Restorative practices being embedded in schoolwide structures created conditions for relationships to thrive and positively impact school culture.

Theme 2: Leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

School leaders can intentionally create an environment where teachers feel empowered to prioritize and value student-teacher relationships. During the study, teachers emphasized the need for school leaders to weave the value of relationships into the overall school vision. When reflecting on how that vision is communicated, Mr. Williams shared about the foundational importance of relationships, and that “having this be a part of our school growth plan this year is one of the most critical ways that leaders impact relationships.” Conversely, it was pointed out that when leaders do not communicate clearly about the importance of building and sustaining relationships, it can impact what is prioritized schoolwide. Ms. Brown shared, “I think not driving the bus is a way that it can be hindered...because we have a million things to do. So, if leaders aren't bringing us back to that reflection about students and relationships, that's a way it can be hindered.”

Embedding the value of relationships into a wide variety of school structures helped put this into practice for teachers and leaders. Participants referenced a variety of school structures that they felt supported building relational capacity with students, including scheduled weekly advisement, new teacher PLCs, Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) meetings, check-in/check-out behavior intervention, and weekly behavior reflection called Reflect & Reset. When talking about the intention of scheduled weekly advisement, Ms. Brown said, “That was the point of advisement and advisors, right? Building relationships and bringing us back to that, not

just the instructional push forward, but also the relationship building.” In addition to scheduled time like advisement, leaders can further prioritize relationships by providing dedicated time within school structures for teachers to reflect on relationships with their colleagues. Mrs. Morrison shared, “I liked that we had a PLC like this, where we really focused on that [relationships] and just making that a focus for teachers to think about with each other.”

A structure most frequently referenced by teachers and stakeholders was the foundation of restorative practices and a restorative culture that was in place at Carson Johnson Middle School and how the associated structures had created conditions for relationships to grow and thrive. Ms. Marshall emphasized this by stating, “I really think you can't ever underestimate or understate the importance of having restorative culture in building positive relationships.” While Ms. Marshall has been at CJMS for six years, the sentiment was echoed by Mrs. Morrison, a first-year teacher, who shared:

I know a lot of the systems we have in place for our restorative stuff that can be really helpful. When I've done a [restorative] circle with a kid, that helps to address the problem, but also do it in a way where we're still restoring the relationship that was there, and it helps create a way forward to continue to have a relationship and to continue to build that.

The researcher recorded throughout her journal that teachers made frequent mention of restorative practices and their impact on their relationships with students. All participants noted it during interviews or focus groups. It serves as a reminder that no one intervention or strategy happens in a silo; instead, it relies upon the work that came before and the work that comes after. This highlighted the importance of structures to sustain impact.

Leaders must support the structures in place through consistent use. Mr. Williams shared about an interaction with an administrator where he had submitted an office referral for an incident with a student but had not submitted a request for a restorative circle. In following up about the referral and how an administrator supported the repair of the relationship with the student, Mr. Williams stated, “I appreciated that administrator saying, Hey, here's the outcome. Do you want to circle up for that? And I was like, yes, absolutely.” The situation highlights an example of open communication between teachers and leaders that helped teachers sustain relationships and avoid punitive punishment, and how a leader the implementation of schoolwide structures for relationship building. Mrs. Emerson also discussed the communication and collaboration with school leaders that she had experienced:

[School leaders are] not just, well, you need to figure this out, or get over it, and it's never writing off the situation. It's always, what can we do to help tomorrow be a better day, or this week, since this relationship has to continue until May. So, what are we going to do to, help fix this for the future?

The two-way nature of communication between teachers and leaders can have a positive impact on relationships because it keeps school leaders and teachers on the same page. Ms. Marshall shared, “Communication, that's the biggest thing. It's teachers communicating their needs to admin, admin communicating their needs to teachers. Just always staying in the loop with each other.”

Research Question 2 sought to understand stakeholders’ perspectives about the leaders’ roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships. The theme that emerged from this question was that leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school

structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships. Next Research Question 3 will be presented, which explored the perspectives of the Action Research Design Team about the impact of the intervention.

Research Question 3

The final research question sought to understand the perspectives of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT). How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships? Findings related to Research Question 3 included:

1. A foundation of restorative practices increased teachers' engagement in and perceptions of the impact of strategies for building and sustaining relationships with students.
2. The strategies provided a common language and have the potential to lead to a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.

Theme 3: A foundation of restorative practices created the conditions for learning intentional strategies and moved toward a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.

As discussed within the findings related to Research Question 2, teachers referenced the importance of existing school structures, specifically restorative practices, when discussing the building and sustaining of student-teacher relationships. The importance was echoed within the Action Research Design Team. Mr. Matthews described how existing structures supported the interventions, stating the importance of “putting systematic infrastructures in place, and, building on that restorative school model, and then, building in the structures for teachers to reflect, and then giving them tools to help build those relationships or restore those relationships.”

The researcher asked the ARDT members directly if they thought that existing school structures helped make the interventions more impactful. Speaking of the professional learning on the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) framework, Mr. Frenchman shared, “I think about the

EMR PL and the conversations that it started, and just how succinct and easy it [the PL] was. Conversations keep happening because of the fact that people do, just in general, buy into the power of relationships.” The team attributed this to the intentionality of the intervention, and how it built upon the existing structure of Restorative Practices.

The ARDT members were clear in their evaluation of the potential long-term impact of the interventions on school culture. Mr. Matthews shared, “I don't think one PL and introducing EMR is going to impact culture necessarily, but if we keep layering it into different conversations, then it will.” The team agreed that the interventions provided the start of a common language and could lead to a greater impact. Ms. Brown described this by saying:

I think it gives a framework. Because I think saying things like, are you building relationships? Have you built a relationship? That's not a tool, that's not a resource, that's not a framework, that's not something that gives anybody anything other than anxiety, like, am I? And so I think giving a framework is always helpful as a starting spot or a growing spot for people.

When discussing how the interventions provided guidance without becoming too rigid, Mr. Matthews asserted:

I think that helps in how we created things for the sixth-grade group of teachers [the ARIT], and then how we've approached going into the PL. We understand that teachers want to walk away with something that they can actually use that's succinct and not formulaic because the relationships aren't formulaic. It gives you a pathway, a framework.

The interventions intentionally focused on teachers' relationships with students and how school leaders can facilitate structures that systematically support relationship-building. The impact of a

systemized approach was echoed by participants. In his interview, Mr. Williams shared his thoughts about the EMR framework:

Some of these are the things that I naturally did. But having it codified by like a system., having an understanding of those pieces and the parts they serve in working with students helped me be intentional about hitting those pieces. So I think that some of this is what I was already doing in some way, but it was probably more amorphous, more of a blob, not systematic. I think that it gives me the language to use as I'm thinking about my relationships with students.

The interventions of the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework and the Professional Learning Community relied on the prior experiences and backgrounds of the participants, and the structures already in place at Carson Johnson Middle School.

Research Question 3 explored the perspectives of the Action Research Design Team and the impact of the intervention. The theme that emerged from Research Question 3 was that a foundation of restorative practices increased teachers' engagement in and perceptions of the impact of strategies for building and sustaining relationships with students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter synthesizes the thematic findings derived from the action research cycles conducted at Carson Johnson Middle School. These findings connect to the study's purpose, research questions, logic model, and theoretical framework. The research aimed to explore the impact of intentional strategies for fostering student-teacher relationships on the classroom environment and school culture and to understand how leadership facilitates structures to sustain these relationships. Guided by the theoretical framework adapted from Mezirow's

Transformational Learning Theory, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) implemented interventions emphasizing reflection, communicative learning, and discourse.

Three overarching themes emerged aligned with the three research questions. First, intentional strategies for relationship-building helped teachers focus on individual students, fostering personal connections and enhancing the classroom community. Second, leadership actions, including communicating a vision, modeling relationships, and embedding relational values into school structures, empowered teachers to prioritize relationships. Third, a foundation of restorative practices created the conditions for learning intentional strategies and moved toward a schoolwide structure for relationship building. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of the study and discusses the implications and the connections to leadership practices.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. This study sought to examine 6th grade teachers' perspectives in different subject areas on interdisciplinary teams and how student-teacher relationships impacted the teachers' perceptions of their classrooms. Additionally, this study included perspectives from teachers about how the facilitation of support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships impacted school culture.

To address the purpose of this action research study, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?
2. How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

This chapter presents a summary of the research design. Then the chapter describes the major findings and themes as they relate to the literature reviewed and the research questions.

The chapter also details the limitations of the study, the implications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers, and the researcher's concluding thoughts.

Summary of the Research Design

The action research case study took place in the fall of the 2024-2025 school year at Carson Johnson Middle School (CJMS). This study looked at what structures can be used in an urban characteristic, high-poverty middle school to enhance student-teacher relationships, specifically focusing on how leaders can create and support structures to build and sustain student-teacher relationships. The study was grounded in reflection and discourse leading to changes in participants' perspectives and actions. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) supported the researcher with the planning of interventions and analysis of the findings.

Action Research

The Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT) was comprised of eight 6th-grade teachers at CJMS. The team consisted of 6th-grade teachers on two interdisciplinary grade-level teams, a Gifted teacher on the 6th-grade team, and a connections teacher. The ARIT was designed to include at least three of the four teachers from an interdisciplinary team. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) included the researcher, a teacher who also served as the school's PBIS coach, the school's restorative practices coordinator, and a restorative practices consultant who worked with the Ellington School District. Because action research is collaborative and involves active participation, an aspect of the teams to note was that one teacher served on both the ARDT and ARIT. The study was comprised of two action research cycles. Action research is cyclical and consists of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting (Mertler, 2006). The cycles of reflection embedded within action research allowed the Action

Research Design Team to analyze the implementation of strategies and the reflection of the participants to design the next steps.

The ARIT was interviewed through focus groups at the start of the study; the focus groups focused on teachers' descriptions of the relationships they built and sustained with students, the impact of those relationships, and the role of leaders in building and sustaining relationships with students. The ARIT then participated in individual interviews at the end of the study to discern their perspectives on the impact of the interventions and changes in perspective or actions. The ARDT participated in a focus group at the end of the study to discover their perspectives on the design and implementation of the interventions. Additionally, data were collected from ARIT meetings, ARDT meetings, observation notes, documents and artifacts, and the researcher's journal.

Theory of Change, Logic Model, and Theoretical Framework

To guide each cycle, the Action Research Design Team (ARDT) utilized Lewin's Unfreeze, Change, and Refreeze logic model (Kuhn, 1951). The theoretical framework of the study was based on an adaptation of Transformational Learning Theory adapted from Mezirow (2001) and Saavedra (1996). Transformative Learning theory asserts that learners can adjust their thinking based on new information. The teaching experience is shaped by the interactions teachers and students have in the classroom and how teachers respond to students. Critical reflection is a process that leads learners to examine what we know and our frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997).

Through the lens of Transformative Learning theory, teachers learn new information that leads to changes in practice and perceptions in the classroom. The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) implemented cycles of research focusing on reflection, communicative learning, and

discourse leading to the generation of new knowledge and perspective transformation. Reinforcement from leadership and the support of schoolwide structures during the implementation of new action supported sustained change as teachers “refreeze.” Leader support, prioritization of relationships, and modeling of positive relationships reinforced the importance of building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

Themes Related to the Research Questions and Scholarly Research Reviewed

Three research questions guided this study. The questions focused on the impact of intentional strategies and leaders’ roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships. Analysis of the collected qualitative data led to emergent themes that connected to the literature reviewed and the research questions.

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 1

Research Question 1: How do teachers describe the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships in their classroom environment and school culture?

Theme 1: An intentional focus on relationships fostered individual relationships and improved community.

There is a significant impact of positive student-teacher relationships on middle school students’ motivation, engagement, and performance, especially when compared to that of students at the high school level (Scales, 2020). The question of how teachers described the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships was essential for this study. The findings showed that teachers increased focus on the individual relationships and awareness of individual students in their classroom through the Establish-Maintain-Restore strategy (Duong et al., 2018) and participation in a Professional Learning Community (PLC).

The concept of intentionality with relationships was recurring amongst participants, and all reported it led to change in their interactions with students. By focusing on where they were in their relationship with each individual student, teachers could be intentional about the type of interaction. The success of relationship-building is more related to the type of interaction than the frequency of interactions (Yassine et al., 2020).

At the start of the study, participants identified that students were more likely to respond positively to redirection and more likely to repair harm after a negative interaction when there was an established relationship already present. This finding is supported by Anyon et al. (2018), who found that positive relationships minimize problem behaviors and enhance the effectiveness of interventions and consequences.

The impact of relationships extends beyond the individual student. The findings of the study indicated a positive impact on both the classroom and school community, with participants reporting increased class involvement and willingness to engage in difficult work. This is supported by research findings that positive student-teacher relationships foster student belonging in the school, academic motivation, and harmonious classroom environments (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2019; Poulou, 2017; Scales et al., 2020).

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 2

Research Question 2: How do stakeholders describe leaders' roles in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships and the impact on school culture?

Theme 2: Leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships.

School leaders acknowledge that strong student-teacher relationships support the general climate of their school buildings (Anyon et al., 2018). Creating opportunities for teachers to know that their leader values and prioritizes relationships is essential to support teachers' relationships with students. The impact of the leader in facilitating support structures for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships is the central idea of Research Question 2. Findings emphasized the importance of leaders communicating a vision that included the importance of relationships. Lustick (2021) found that leadership guided by values focused on relationships over order creates a culture that promotes trust and positive relationships schoolwide.

Participants noted that it was more than just the school leaders' vision that was needed to create a culture of relationships; it is that relationship building is embedded into schoolwide structures. Successful middle school leaders create and support organizational structures that foster meaningful relationships while also maximizing intentional learning (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). One of the schoolwide structures that was identified to have a tremendous impact on relationships at Carson Johnson Middle School is the school's long-time commitment to restorative practices. A recurring theme throughout the study was how restorative practices and the structures within CJMS that are rooted in restorative practices created conditions for relationships to thrive. When relationships are positive, teachers feel empowered to respond to negative behaviors with restorative conversations, moving away from an overreliance on exclusionary measures (Dean & Gibbs, 2023).

In Research Question 2, the emerging theme was that leader actions, including modeling positive relationships, communicating a strong vision, and embedding relationships into school structures, impacted teachers' prioritization of building and sustaining positive student-teacher

relationships. Leadership actions had an overall impact on how teachers viewed their relationships with students and the importance of those relationships.

Discussion of Findings from Research Question 3

Research Question 3: How does the action research team describe the impact of intentional strategies for building positive relationships?

Theme 3: A foundation of restorative practices created the conditions for learning intentional strategies and moved toward a schoolwide structure for relationship-building.

The interventions of the Establish-Maintain-Restore framework and the Professional Learning Community relied on the prior experiences and backgrounds of the participants, and the structures already in place at Carson Johnson Middle School. The Action Research Design Team concluded that the foundation of restorative practices had a direct impact on teachers' engagement in and perceptions of the impact of strategies for building and sustaining student-teacher relationships. When schools welcome restorative practices, the focus shifts from rules and regulations to fostering meaningful relationships and positive interactions, leading to a diminished need for punitive consequences and an increased sense of community (Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Lustick, 2021). At CJMS, restorative practices had been a foundation of the school community since 2017, with the school now having a full-time restorative coordinator in addition to a district-wide partnership with restorative practitioners.

While the ARDT acknowledged that a short-term intervention does not change culture by itself, a finding of the study was that the interventions provided a common language and had the potential to lead to a schoolwide structure. Participants found value in the interventions of Establish-Maintain-Restore and the Professional Learning Community (PLC) and indicated a desire to engage in continued work. A study by Faulkner et al. (2023) found that both teachers

and school leaders rank trusting relationships and supportive environments among key components for sustaining positive middle school culture.

Limitations of the Current Study

Qualitative research has inherent limitations but remains well-suited for exploring complex social environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Many of the study's limitations stemmed from the nature of qualitative research and the specific study context. The study was conducted over a short period of time; if the timeline was longer, it could increase implementation and create additional data and reliability of the findings.

The researcher acted as a participant-observer, which introduced an element of researcher subjectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Holding a position of authority within the school as an administrator, the researcher had a power dynamic in relation to the participants. While participation was voluntary, this positional power may have influenced the findings. Additionally, the study focused on data from a single urban-characteristic middle school in the southeastern United States, limiting its transferability to other schools and districts.

Implications and Recommendations for Practitioners

The researcher provides recommendations aligned with the research findings and the literature reviewed. The implications are relevant for all school leaders, particularly those in the middle school setting.

Enhancing student-teacher relationships should be a priority for middle school leaders and teachers. The teacher-student relationship is key to students' achievement, behavior, motivation, and well-being (Hattie, 2012; Krane et al., 2016; Roorda et al., 2017). According to Sethi and Scales (2020), the relationships between students and teachers are critical at the middle

school level, where the quality of the relationship is shown to have more potential for a positive impact on engagement and performance than in high school.

The findings of this study and related literature indicate the importance of a school leader who communicates a vision that prioritizes relationships and establishes schoolwide structures that support intentional relationship-building (Bishop & Harrison, 2021; Lustick, 2021). At Carson Johnson Middle School, an essential schoolwide structure for relationships is the school's long-term focus on implementing restorative practices. The implementation of restorative practices diminishes the need for punitive consequences, builds a sense of community, and increases positive reporting of relationships between students and teachers (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). Relationship-building also needs to be embedded into various school structures, like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), advisement programs, and professional learning.

While strategies for building and sustaining relationships with students vary, teachers must engage in intentional strategies for building and sustaining these relationships. Developing positive student-teacher relationships involves various strategies, including classroom interventions, restorative practices, social-emotional competence, communication, and cultural competence (Aruta et al., 2019; Collins & Landrum, 2022; Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lustick, 2021). Preventative strategies and interventions, such as Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR), contribute to improved relationships, especially for students with initially low-quality connections (Duong et al., 2018). An emergent theme from the study found that when teachers had an intentional focus on relationships, they fostered individual relationships and cited improvements in their overall classroom communities.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

One of the emerging themes of this research study was how the foundation of restorative practices at Carson Johnson Middle School created the conditions for learning intentional strategies for relationship-building and helped move toward a schoolwide structure for relationship-building. The literature surrounding restorative practices establishes that restorative practices increase reports of positive relationships. Future researchers could replicate the study in schools without an established foundation in restorative practices. Additionally, further research could investigate questions about relationships from students' perspectives, since their voice about relationships and school culture is important.

Other limitations of the study should be considered in future research. This study was conducted in an urban characteristic middle school with sixth-grade teachers over a short period of time. Areas of further research could look at the impact of intentional strategies for relationship-building and how leaders support structures for relationship-building in rural or urban schools, with teachers from varied grade levels, or for a longer period.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

Social-emotional learning and disproportionate discipline outcomes are frequently a part of lawmakers' discussions around education at both the federal and state levels. These topics are included in funding recommendations as well as guidance for school district policies. Most recently, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021 includes areas of focus that include educator well-being and more inclusive and equitable learning environments. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) created a broader definition of student success that included “nonacademic” indicators like student engagement. In Title IV of ESSA, there are specific

recommendations for a broader approach to professional development and learning to make it more collaborative, job-embedded, and classroom-focused.

School leaders are often left to interpret this at the district and school levels. The findings of this study highlight the need for schools to establish practices promoting positive student-teacher relationships. The participants of this study identified the impact of intentional strategies for building relationships on their classroom environments and their own well-being. The model of including teachers in the action research process, using research-based practices and collaboration to drive their own learning, meets the professional development requirements of ESSA while also improving school climate, another requirement of ESSA.

In 2014, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice jointly issued a Dear Colleague Letter (DCL) on racial disparities in school discipline (US DOE & US DOJ, 2014). This was rescinded in 2018 by President Trump (Cordichon & Darling-Hammond, 2019). A series of case studies was released in 2023 by President Biden's administration that lacked the specific clarity of the 2014 guidance and instead asked states and districts to ensure their policies are applied fairly and consistently to students in all racial and ethnic groups (US DOE & US DOJ, 2023). With federal guidance on school discipline changing frequently, much of the policy is left up to states.

According to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data from the 2017-18 school year, the most recent OCR data set, Black students made up 15.1 percent of students enrolled in public schools, but they comprised 38.2 percent of students suspended that year (US DOE, 2021). Research has emphasized the importance of cultural competence in building relationships with students, especially in scenarios where the teacher's background is different than the students (Williams et al., 2019).

Federal guidance on discrimination in schools is not law. Rather, it provides guidance to state, district, and school leaders about how discipline practices and policies could lead to federal investigations for discrimination through the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), the US Department of Justice, and the US Department of Education in line with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Many state legislatures have passed laws that aim to reduce exclusionary discipline and racially disproportionate discipline, including the state where this study occurs, where the use of alternatives to expulsion and suspension is required (Policy Surveillance Program, 2018; Rafa, 2019). State laws require districts to use alternatives to suspension, including behavioral interventions or restorative practices. Strategies and recommendations from this study can support school leaders and teachers in implementing proactive practices to promote the reduction of exclusionary discipline.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to examine how leaders enrich school culture by facilitating support structures for building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships in a middle school. The study emphasized both the complexities of relationship-building and the importance of positive relationships in middle school. Supporting teachers as they work to build and sustain relationships with students is essential for improving school culture and creating a sense of community. Structures for building and sustaining relationships are needed to have an impact outside of individual teachers' classrooms. To create and sustain structures for relationship-building, leaders must view relationships as a critical part of school.

Also crucial is the prioritization of relationships by school leaders. When school leaders communicate a clear vision that emphasizes the importance of relationships, teachers prioritize relationship-building. As one participant stated, the school leader “needs to be a clanging bell,

always bringing up relationships.” Teachers expressed appreciation for the time to reflect on individual students and asked for more time centered around relationship-building, recognizing the overwhelming impact it has on individual students and the classroom community. Leader-supported formal and informal structures cultivate the desire for reflection and discourse focused on relationship-building.

The context of the study and the structures already in place matter. Throughout the study, teachers and research team members referenced the restorative practices that were already in place at Carson Johnson Middle School. The established community-focused practices created a foundation for the learning of new structures for relationship-building and reflective discourse around relationships. This is a reminder that all change takes time and is dependent on the conditions already in place.

Given the importance of relationships, especially in the transition to middle school, support from school leaders focused on relationship-building is essential. The time spent intentionally prioritizing and embedding relationship-building into school structures will be worthwhile for school leaders and the school community. If carried out with intention, the impact of these efforts will be positive for students, teachers, and school culture.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Action Research Implementation Team Individual Interviews

1. How would you describe the relationships you have with your students? How do you know if you have a positive relationship with a student?
2. How did your work with EMR and in the PLC through the study impact your teacher-student relationships?
3. What, if any, differences in relationships did you notice with students when you intentionally built relationships with them compared to those you do not?
4. What challenges did you experience when building and sustaining positive relationships with students?
5. How do you think student-teacher relationships impact the overall school culture?
6. What do leaders do to help you build and sustain positive relationships with your students? What do they do to hinder it?
7. What additional things could leaders do to support you in building positive relationships with your students?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add about building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships or your experience with this work that I haven't asked?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Protocols

Action Research Implementation Team Initial Focus Group

1. How would you describe the relationships you have with your students?
2. How do you know if you have a positive relationship with a student?
3. How do teacher-student relationships impact you as a teacher?
4. How do teacher-student relationships impact the overall school culture?
5. Tell me about strategies you use for building and sustaining relationships in your classroom.
6. What, if any, differences in relationships do you notice with students you intentionally build relationships with compared to those you do not?
7. What challenges have you experienced when building and sustaining positive relationships with students?
8. What do leaders do to help you build and sustain positive relationships with your students? What do they do to hinder it?
9. How do you perceive leaders' support in building positive relationships with your students?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add about building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships that I haven't asked?

Action Research Design Team Focus Group

1. What is the leader's role in supporting and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships in the school? How do leaders help or hurt this process?
2. How do leaders impact student-teacher relationships in the school? How does this impact school culture?
3. What interventions do you feel have been helpful in building and sustaining relationships?
4. What impact do you see from the work of the design team? On teachers? Leaders? School culture?
5. How has your background and experience contributed to the work of the design team?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add about building and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships that I haven't asked?