

The impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior: an explanatory mixed
methods study

by

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B.S., Baylor University, 2013
M.A., University of Texas at Arlington, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

The quality and importance of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) have long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning. Research consistently highlights positive TSRs as a critical factor in educational outcomes (e.g., Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999). Teachers' and students' perceptions of TSRs have been associated with students' academic achievement, behavior, attendance, and expectations for educational success (Robinson, 2022). However, less is known about how teachers perceive the impact of these relationships on classroom behavior and the relational practices used to cultivate them. The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods study explores the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior, focusing on the teacher's perspective.

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey distributed via Qualtrics and shared through teacher organizations and social media platforms. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze teachers' perceptions of TSR impact, the importance and frequency of relationship-building strategies, motivations for relationship-building, and perceived barriers. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with three elementary teachers and analyzed using a two-cycle coding process, including value, descriptive, and pattern coding to identify overarching themes.

Findings indicated that teachers overwhelmingly perceive positive TSRs as influential in improving student engagement, motivation, classroom climate, and behavioral outcomes. Five major themes were constructed from the qualitative analysis: (1) All Relationships Matter, (2) Classroom Management, (3) Intentional Relational Strategies, (4) Student Voice Matters, and (5) Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building. While teachers prioritized relational practices,

they also identified systemic barriers such as time constraints, limited professional development, and rising behavioral challenges. Implications highlight the need for targeted training, structural supports, and schoolwide practices that center relationship-building as a foundational component of effective classroom management and student behavioral support.

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Approved by:

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	xiii
List of Tables	xiv
Acknowledgements	xv
Dedication	xvii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Significance of the Problem.....	4
Study Purpose and Research Questions	5
Study Overview	7
Boundaries of the study: Limitations and Delimitations	9
Limitations	9
Delimitations	10
Definition of Terms	11
Attachment Theory:	11
Classroom Management:	12
Relational Self-Efficacy:.....	12
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):	12
Teacher-Student Relationships (TSRs):.....	13
Positionality Statement	13
Summary	14
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	16
Teacher-Student Relationships	17
Definition & Importance of Positive Relationships.....	17
Role of teachers in building relationships.....	20
Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior	21
Behavioral outcomes linked to positive relationships	22
Behavioral outcomes linked to negative relationships.....	24
Teacher Motivations and Strategies for Cultivating Relationships	25
Intrinsic Motivations	26
Extrinsic Motivations.....	27

Strategies for Cultivating Relationships	29
Implications for Classroom Management and Student Behavior	32
Proactive Classroom Management	32
Challenges to Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships	35
System Barriers	35
Teacher-Related Challenges	37
Student-Related Challenges	39
Theoretical Framework.....	42
Summary	45
Chapter 3 - Methodology	47
Research Design and Methodological Approach.....	49
Quantitative Approach	51
Qualitative Approach	52
Study Context	53
Setting	53
Participants and Sampling.....	54
Data Sources & Collection Methods	57
Quantitative Data Sources & Data Collection	57
Section.....	59
Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher Student Relationships Impact on Student Behavior.....	59
Section 2: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies.....	59
Section 3: Frequency of Use of Strategies	59
Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships.....	60
Section 5: Challenges and Barriers	60
Section 6: Teacher Demographics	60
Qualitative Data Sources & Data Collection	61
Data Analysis.....	63
Quantitative Data Analysis	64
Data Preparation.....	64
Descriptive Statistics.....	64
Qualitative Data Analysis	66

Data Preparation.....	66
Coding Process.....	67
Theme Development.....	68
Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data.....	70
Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative Phases.....	70
Interpreting and Merging Data.....	70
Reliability and Validity - Quantitative Data.....	71
Consistency and Trustworthiness - Qualitative Data.....	73
Summary.....	74
Chapter 4 - Findings.....	76
Quantitative Findings.....	76
Survey Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior	77
Survey Section 2: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies	79
Survey Section 3: Frequency of Use of Strategies.....	81
Survey Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships	82
Survey Section 5: Challenges & Barriers	84
Qualitative Findings.....	86
All Relationships Matter	88
Parent Relationships.....	88
Student Relationships.....	90
Collaboration.....	91
Classroom Management.....	92
Consistency & Follow Through.....	93
Structured Routines & Procedures.....	94
Classroom Climate.....	95
Intentional Relational Strategies	97
Authenticity.....	97
Relational Integrity: Honesty, Trust, and Respect	98
Relational Presence	100
Student Voice Matters.....	101
Student Agency and Buy-In.....	101

Personal Connections.....	103
Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building	105
Time Constraints and Lack of Professional Development	105
Lack of District Support and Guidance	107
Rising Behavioral Challenges.....	108
Summary	110
Chapter 5 - Discussion	111
Summary of Findings.....	112
Quantitative Findings.....	112
Primary Quantitative RQ: Perceived Impact of TSRs on Student Behavior	112
Quantitative Sub-RQ 1: Perceived Importance of Relationship-Building Practices	114
Quantitative Sub-RQ 2: Perceived Reduction of Disruptive Behavior through TSRs ...	115
Qualitative Findings.....	117
Primary Qualitative RQ: Teacher Motivations and Perceived Behavioral Impact of TSRs	
.....	117
Qualitative Sub-RQ 1: Barriers to TSRs and Strategies for Navigating Challenges.....	119
Qualitative Sub-RQ 2: Perceived Influence of TSRs on Behavior and Classroom	
Management.....	123
Explanatory Mixed Methods Findings.....	123
Mixed Methods RQ: Integrated perceptions and explanatory factors of TSR impact on	
student behavior.	123
Implications	128
Implications for Teachers	128
Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development.....	130
Implications for School Administrators.....	132
Implications for Theory	133
Recommendations for Research	137
Early Childhood Perspectives & Expanding Participant Scope.....	137
Longitudinal Research on Teacher-Student Relationships	138
Comparative Studies Across School Contexts.....	139
Limitations	141

Conclusion	142
References	144
Appendix A - Research Consent Form	152
Appendix B - Research Participant Recruitment Flyer.....	153
Appendix C - Student-Teacher Relationship Scale Form.....	154
Appendix D - Adapted Survey for Quantitative Phase.....	155
Appendix E - Semi-Structured Interview Protocol.....	173
Appendix F - IRB Approval	175

List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Explanatory Sequential Design	51
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List of Tables

Table 3.1- Survey Participant Demographics	55
Table 3.2- Interview Participants	56
Table 3.3- Teacher Survey on Student Relationships and Behavior	58
Table 3.4- Semi-Structured Interview Questions.....	62
Table 3.5- Quantitative Research Questions Alignment Table	65
Table 3.6- Qualitative Research Questions Alignment Table	65
Table 3.7- Example of the coding process that led to categories making up the theme of All Relationships Matter	69
Table 4.1- Descriptive Statistics: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior	78
Table 4.2- Descriptive Statistics: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies	80
Table 4.3- Descriptive Statistics: Frequency of Use of Strategies.....	82
Table 4.4- Descriptive Statistics: Motivations for Building Relationships	84
Table 4.5- Descriptive Statistics: Challenges & Barriers	85
Table 4.6- Overview of Thematic Analysis	87
Table 5.1- Joint Display of the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings	127

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Dedication

To all my Latino people. In a time where we are facing so many uncertainties, always remember that only YOU and you alone can define your story. But most importantly... to all my Latina women. Remember...we are not defined by the limitations placed on us, but by the power we carry within us. Continue to rise, to lead, and to rewrite narratives that were never meant to include us, because we belong in every space we choose to enter. I hope you know that your identity is your strength, your culture is your power, and your dreams are valid.

“If you have a dream, don’t let anybody take it away, and always believe that the impossible is possible.”

-Selena Quintanilla

Chapter 1 - Introduction

In classrooms across the United States, teachers are increasingly expected to manage diverse student needs, support social-emotional development, and maintain academic rigor, all within a single instructional day. Central to meeting these demands is the ability to cultivate positive, trusting relationships with students, commonly referred to as teacher-student relationships (TSRs). The responsibility for initiating and nurturing these relationships rests heavily on the teachers. Building and maintaining high-quality TSRs requires intentional effort, reflection, and skill, especially when working with students who exhibit behavioral or academic challenges (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). A growing body of research suggests that building TSRs contribute not only to academic success but also to improved classroom behavior, engagement, and social development (e.g., Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999; Robinson, 2022). However, while the benefits of positive TSRs are well-documented, less is known about how teachers themselves perceive and navigate the process of building these relationships, particularly in relation to student behavior.

This study investigated the perspectives of elementary school teachers across several school districts in the Southern U.S. to understand how they experienced, valued, and implemented relationship-building practices. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this research first gathered quantitative data through surveys and then followed up with qualitative interviews that explored these perceptions more deeply. In doing so, the study contributed to a more nuanced understanding of how TSRs are linked to student behavior, and what factors support or hinder teachers in forming these connections.

Statement of the Problem

While the importance of positive TSRs is widely acknowledged in educational research and policy, teachers continue to face significant barriers to fostering and sustaining these relationships, particularly in classrooms where behavioral challenges are common (Robinson, 2022). Much of the existing literature focuses on the outcomes of TSRs for students, yet there remains a critical gap in understanding the teacher's perspective: What motivates teachers to engage in relationship-building, what obstacles do they face, and how they perceive these relationships influence student behavior? To understand how TSRs are developed and how they influence student behavior and classroom dynamics, this study is grounded in Robinson's (2022) Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships Framework. This framework emphasizes the role of teachers' motivational beliefs, specifically their value for relationships, their self-efficacy in building them, and their sense of responsibility, in shaping relational behaviors and the overall quality of TSRs. Robinson (2022) proposes that the quality of TSRs is largely influenced by teachers' motivational beliefs. Three categories of beliefs that motivate teachers' behavior in building TSRs are: 1) Roles: Teachers' beliefs about their responsibilities and roles in relation to students, 2) Values: The importance teachers assign to TSRs and their perceived benefits, and 3) Self-efficacy: Teachers' confidence in their ability to establish and sustain positive relationships. While Robinson's framework serves as the primary foundation for this study, attachment theory offers important conceptual support. It helps explain the underlying emotional and psychological dynamics that influence how students form relationships with adults, including teachers. The key principles of attachment theory are: importance of early relationships, attachment as an innate system, secure base and safe haven, internal working models, attachment styles, continuity across the lifespan, role of caregiver sensitivity, and the impact of attachment on development

(Bretherton, 1992). Positive, warm, and supportive TSRs are essential and align with the principles of attachment theory, which suggests that secure relationships can foster better emotional and behavioral outcomes for students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

In addition, most empirical work emphasizes student-reported experiences or academic outcomes, leaving a need for more teacher-centered, behavior-focused investigations (Robinson et al., 2019; Robinson, 2022). Without a deeper understanding of the beliefs and lived experiences of teachers, especially in diverse and high-need school contexts, efforts to promote positive TSRs risk being superficial or misaligned with classroom realities. This study addressed this gap by centering teachers' voices that examined how TSRs are formed and maintained in practice, and how they are believed to affect behavioral outcomes. A high-quality TSR is characterized by caring, productive, and respectful interactions, a warm and close personal connection, and positive perceptions from both teachers and students (Robinson, 2022). These relationships form the foundation of a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and motivated to succeed. A positive TSR has been linked to fostering a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and engagement, which are essential for academic and social development (Robinson, 2022). Having positive TSRs can help reduce disruptive behaviors by fostering emotional security, a sense of belonging, and mutual respect. Existing literature has shown that when students feel respected and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to demonstrate cooperative behavior and actively participate in class (Thornberg et al., 2020). Although the benefits of TSRs are acknowledged, the responsibility for initiating and nurturing these relationships rests heavily on the teacher. This requires intentional effort, reflection, and skills, especially when working with students who exhibit behavioral or academic challenges (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Teachers will often build these

relationships with students because they find deep personal fulfillment in doing so. Intrinsic motivations, such as passion for teaching drive many educators to invest time and effort into fostering meaningful connections (Klassen et al., 2012; Abos et al., 2018). However, building and maintaining positive TSRs are not without challenges. Teachers face obstacles such as time constraints and a lack of training in relationship-building techniques, despite the recognized importance of TSRs (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Robinson, 2022). In addition to motivational factors, teachers often operate within institutional conditions that may limit their ability to prioritize relational work (Robinson, 2022). Increasing accountability pressures, testing demands, limited instructional time, and large class sizes can constrain opportunities for meaningful relationship-building in everyday classroom practice. At the same time, teachers report encountering increasingly complex student behavioral and social-emotional needs, which further intensifies the importance of building TSRs while simultaneously making them more difficult to sustain (Thornberg et al., 2020). Despite these realities, professional development frequently emphasizes behavioral management systems (Helker & Ray, 2009) rather than relational competencies, leaving many teachers to rely on personal experience or informal strategies to build connections with students. These tensions highlight the need for research that not only examines the outcomes of TSRs but also investigates how teachers navigate the practical challenges of building and maintaining these relationships within contemporary school environments.

Significance of the Problem

This research is both timely and necessary, particularly as schools increasingly adopt social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices to support student well-being. Understanding how teachers perceive and experience TSRs can inform professional development, policy decisions, and school-based interventions aimed at improving behavior and

school climate. Across multiple school districts in the southern U.S., elementary teachers serve increasingly diverse student populations, making the development of teacher-student relationships not just advantageous, but foundational to student success.

By highlighting the strategies, challenges, and motivations teachers bring to their relationship-building efforts, this study provided practical insights for educators, administrators, and policymakers. The findings may help inform teacher training programs, guide school improvement plans, and promote more relational approaches to classroom management. Furthermore, by utilizing a mixed methods approach, the study offered both generalizable patterns and rich, contextualized narratives that together present a fuller picture of the role TSRs play in shaping student behavior.

Additionally, this research contributed to a deeper understanding of the contextual realities teachers face when attempting to build and sustain positive relationships with students. By identifying systemic pressures such as time constraints, behavioral demands, and inconsistent institutional supports, the study highlights the conditions that help shape relational practices in schools. These insights can support educators and leaders in designing more effective professional learning, school policies, and support systems that enable teachers to prioritize relationship-building as a central component of classroom management and student success.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study explored the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior, focusing on the teacher's perspective. The study examined how teachers understand, implement, and evaluate relationship-building strategies in their classrooms and how these relationships influence student behavioral outcomes. By first collecting quantitative survey data and then conducting qualitative interviews, the study

uncovered patterns in teacher beliefs and practices and then explained those patterns in greater depth. This two-phase approach allowed for a comprehensive investigation of both the general trends and the personal, contextual experiences of teachers as they navigated the relational dynamics of their classrooms.

This is guided by three central research questions that reflect its mixed methods design. The quantitative research question explored how teachers perceived the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. The qualitative research question focused on understanding what motivated teachers to engage in relationship-building, the challenges they faced, and how they perceived the effects of their relational efforts. Finally, the mixed methods research question integrated both phases and examined how the qualitative findings explained or expanded upon the patterns observed in the quantitative data. Together, these questions provided a well-rounded understanding of how positive TSRs shape classroom behavior from the perspective of practicing elementary educators.

The primary *quantitative research question*:

- How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on their students' classroom behavior?

The primary *qualitative research question*:

- What motivates elementary teachers to engage in relationship-building practices, and how do they perceive its impact on classroom behavior?

The *mixed-methods research question*, integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings:

- How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior, and what factors explain the observed patterns in these perceptions?

Study Overview

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design that explored elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRS on student behavior. The research was conducted in two phases. In the quantitative phase, data was collected through a teacher survey that included Likert-scale items (Pianta, 1992) measuring perceptions of relationship building practices, the perceived influence of TSRs on behavior, and teacher demographics. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations were used to summarize the teacher responses and provided a foundational understanding of prevailing perceptions and practices among elementary teachers. The study was conducted across several school districts in the Southern U.S. that examined the dynamics of positive TSRs and their impact on student behavior from the teachers' perspective. During the recruitment phase of the study, there were specific criterion participants that guided the process. The research study focused specifically on elementary teachers who were certified within the Southern U.S. With thousands of elementary schools serving students from PreK-5th grade, the setting offered a valuable opportunity that examined relationship-building practices within a diverse student population.

The quantitative phase of this research study focused on collecting and analyzing numerical data that explored patterns, relationships, and general trends in teacher perceptions of positive TSRs and their observed impact on student behavior. The quantitative phase served two key purposes: 1) to establish patterns in elementary teachers' perceptions of the relationship between TSRs and student behavior, and 2) to guide the selection of participants and interview questions for the qualitative phase. This phase was conducted using a structured survey, adapted from the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Pianta (1992), that gathered elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of TSRs on student behavior. The survey was

distributed through Qualtrics via social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and teacher organizations through a recruitment flyer (Appendix B). The flyer specified that the research study sought out elementary-level teachers (PK-5). The findings from the quantitative phase directly informed the qualitative phase by identifying participants for follow-up interviews. The quantitative data collected through teacher surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistical methods that examined teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. Data analysis was conducted through the analysis tool in Qualtrics.

The qualitative phase of this research study explored elementary teachers lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding positive TSRs and their impact on classroom behavior. This phase complemented the quantitative findings by providing an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the *how* and *why* behind the observed patterns regarding TSRs. The qualitative phase served two key purposes: 1) provide context and depth to the numerical trends identified in the quantitative phase, and 2) capture the complexity of teacher-student dynamics, offering real-world examples and personal stories that enhance the study's practice significance. This component used one primary data source: semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with three elementary teachers who participated in the quantitative survey. Data analysis started with first cycle coding, using an inductive approach that allowed categories and patterns to emerge from the data organically. A second cycle of coding, such as pattern coding, was conducted to identify broader themes related to teachers' motivations, perceived impacts of TSRs, classroom management strategies, and contextual barriers. Once cycle coding was complete, the next state of analysis involved developing overarching themes that captured the deeper meanings and patterns within the data. From the analysis of interviews, five themes were

constructed: (1) All Relationships Matter, (2) Classroom Management, (3) Intentional Relational Strategies, (4) Student Voice Matters, and (5) Systemic Factors & Barriers.

Boundaries of the study: Limitations and Delimitations

Every research study operates within a set of boundaries that shape the scope, depth, and applicability of its findings. These boundaries are defined through limitations, which refers to challenges and shortcomings that are inherent in the research and over which the researcher has little or no control and authority to manage or overcome (Bloomberg, 2023), and delimitations, which refer to the initial choices made about the broader and overall design of your study. Delimitations are the indicators of how a researcher intentionally and purposively limits a study through scope and participation (Bloomberg, 2023).

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample size for the quantitative survey. Although 40 participants started the survey, only 14 of them completed the survey in its entirety, which limited the scope of statistical analyses and restricted the study to descriptive statistics rather than inferential analyses.

Second, the qualitative phase of the study included only three teacher interviews rather than the originally intended six participants across elementary grade levels. As a result, perspectives from early elementary teachers were limited, which inadvertently affects the transferability of findings across all elementary grade levels.

Third, there was strong agreement among survey participants on the value of TSRs which in turn limited the representation of more critical perspectives.

Finally, recruitment constraints restricted participant access. Due to professional conflicts of interest related to employment within a regional education service center, participants were

recruited through teacher organizations and social media rather than directly through local school districts.

Delimitations

There are several delimitations in this research study, the first being the population criteria established for the quantitative phase of the study. Participation was limited to elementary school teachers only. This criterion was intentionally selected to focus the study on elementary educators working within the Southern U.S. This perspective provided meaningful context in exploring how teachers in early grade levels perceived and cultivated positive TSRs. It created an opportunity that examined relationship-building practices during the foundational years of learning. Early TSRs are critical, as they lay the groundwork for children's social, emotional, and academic development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The elementary years represent a pivotal stage for forming these bonds, which contribute to emotional security, behavioral adjustment, and motivation to learn.

Furthermore, another delimitation is the time frame in which I collected data. Data was collected during the fall semester of 2025. As a former teacher and school administrator, the first few months in a school year are crucial in setting classroom expectations and building effective classroom procedures to help in building a positive school climate. Research indicates that positive TSRs are fundamental to effective proactive classroom management (Chen et al., 2021). This was an ideal time for teachers to reflect on their past experiences as they work on setting up their classroom and building relationships with their new group of students.

Lastly, as the researcher, I chose to focus on teacher-student relationships as a key factor of what impacts student behavior. As a former campus administrator, I consistently reflected on the several factors influencing student behavior and frequently considered how we, as a campus,

could foster a more positive school climate. I observed that classrooms characterized by high levels of student engagement, cooperation, and academic achievement often had one key element in common, teachers who had built positive relationships with their students. This recurring pattern led me to question why such relational practices were not more widespread across the campus. TSRs influence student behavior, shaping academic engagement, emotional well-being, and classroom interactions. Research has shown that positive relationships can serve as protective factors against behavioral challenges, promote a supportive classroom climate, and encourage constructive student participation (Hamre and Pianta, 2005; Sabol and Pianta, 2012; Buyse et al., 2008; Pianta & Allen, 2008).

Definition of Terms

To ensure clarity and consistency throughout this study, key terms and concepts are defined as they are used within the context of this research. These definitions are drawn from relevant literature and serve to establish a common understanding for both the researcher and the reader. By clearly outlining how central terms are conceptualized, this section helps frame the scope and focus of the study.

Attachment Theory:

Attachment theory, initially formulated by John Bowlby in a series of papers starting in the late 1950s and later empirically expanded and refined by Mary Ainsworth through her observational studies in the 1950s and 1960s, provides a psychological framework for understanding the emotional bonds formed between infants and their caregivers (Bowlby 1958; Ainsworth, 1967; Bretherton, 1992). Positive, warm, and supportive teacher-student relationships are essential and align with the principles of attachment theory, which suggests that secure

relationships can foster better emotional and behavioral outcomes for students (Thornberg et al., 2020).

Classroom Management:

This is broadly defined as the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). This concept emphasizes prevention through planning, and it incorporates the essential features of classroom organization, management, and discipline (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018).

Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships (TSRs) Framework:

Developed by Robinson (2022), this framework highlights that teachers' relational behaviors are motivated by three key beliefs: their perceived roles and responsibilities toward students, the value they place on TSRs, and their relational self-efficacy. These beliefs are influenced by broader sociocultural contexts such as school policies and cultural norms.

Relational Self-Efficacy:

A teacher's belief in their capability to establish, sustain, and repair positive relationships with students. Higher relational self-efficacy increases teachers' motivation to engage in relationship-building, especially in challenging situations (Robinson, 2022).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):

Social and emotional learning involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (*Social Emotional Learning | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE)*). Teachers trained in social-emotional learning are better equipped to support students' emotional development and

address their social needs, thereby promoting more effective teacher-student relationships (Raimundo et al., 2024).

Teacher-Student Relationships (TSRs):

Positive and meaningful interactions between teachers and students characterized by caring, productive, and respectful interactions, a warm and close personal connection, and positive perceptions from both teachers and students (Robinson, 2022). These relationships form the foundation of a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and motivated to succeed. Although some research refers to these interactions as child-teacher relationships (Helker & Ray, 2009), teacher-child relationships (Varghese et al., 2019), or student-teacher relationships (Gallagher et al., 2013), the term teacher-student relationships (TSRs) is used throughout this study to maintain consistency across elementary educational contexts.

Positionality Statement

I approached this study as a Hispanic bilingual educator and doctoral candidate with over 12 years of experience in public education, including roles as a classroom teacher and assistant principal. I bring both personal and professional insights into the importance of relationship-building in elementary education. My background has shaped my understanding of how cultural context and lived experiences influence educational practices and classroom dynamics. While I am not currently employed in any of the districts where this study was conducted, my prior role as an assistant principal provided me with firsthand experience supporting teachers and managing student behavior in the potential study context. In that role, I consistently observed that classrooms where positive teacher-student relationships were present tended to experience fewer behavioral challenges in comparison to classrooms with more challenging teacher-student

relationships. These observations highlighted the powerful role of relational connection in shaping classroom dynamics and inspired my interest in exploring this topic further through research.

I acknowledge that my beliefs about the value of teacher-student relationships may shape the way I interpret participants' experiences and classroom observations. To mitigate potential bias, I maintained reflexive practices throughout the research process, including keeping an audit trail, reflexive journaling, engaging in peer debriefing, and grounded findings with participants' voice. My goal was to authentically represent the perspectives of the teachers involved in this study, created opportunities for their voice to be in conversation with the literature, and also reflected critically on how my positionality influences the research process.

Summary

This chapter introduced the focus of the study: exploring elementary teachers' perceptions of how positive TSRs influence student behavior. The chapter outlined the purpose and significance of the research, established the research questions guiding the study, and introduced the explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Drawing from personal experience and observed patterns in classroom management, the chapter also described the theoretical framework along with attachment theory and contextualized the study within broader concerns about student behavior, teacher motivation, and school climate. To further ground the study in existing research, the next chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature. Chapter 2 explored prior research on TSRs, including their impact on student outcomes, common strategies teachers use to build those relationships, and the systemic and contextual challenges that hinder relational practices. Additionally, the literature review examined motivational factors influencing teacher engagement in relationship-building and identified key gaps that this study sought to

address. Together, these insights provided the foundation for understanding the relevance and timeliness of the current research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The quality and importance of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) have long been recognized as a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning. Positive relationships between teachers and students can foster a supportive classroom environment, enhance student engagement, and even improve behavioral outcomes. These relationships are particularly critical in addressing classroom challenges, as they influence students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic success. Although these relationships are crucial, gaining insight into their dynamics from the teacher's perspective, particularly how they are developed, how they influence student behavior, the motivations driving teachers to build them, and the challenges they encounter and overcome, remains essential. This literature review examines the existing research on TSRs, focusing on their impact on classroom behavior and management.

This chapter is organized into five sections. The first section explores the theoretical foundations of TSRs, including the definition and importance of positive relationships, as well as key frameworks such as attachment theory and social-emotional learning. The second section examines the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior and learning. The third section delves into teacher motivations and strategies for cultivating relationships. The fourth section examines the implications for classroom management. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing challenges and barriers to relationship building, such as time constraints, and presents the theoretical framework guiding this study, Robinson's (2022) Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships Framework, as a lens for understanding the factors that influence teachers' relational practices.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The foundation of positive TSRs lies in a robust understanding of the theoretical frameworks that underpin human interactions and social behavior. Attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992) and social-emotional learning (Raimundo et al., 2024) provide valuable insights into how these relationships develop and their critical role in educational settings. These frameworks emphasize the importance of fostering trust, emotional safety, and mutual respect, which are essential for both academic and behavioral outcomes (Bretherton, 1992; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Relationship-building is a key component of early academic success and helps reduce behavioral concerns in the classroom (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Baker, 2006). This section explores these theoretical foundations, highlighting their relevance to teacher-student dynamics and their implications for promoting a positive and well-managed classroom environment.

Definition & Importance of Positive Relationships

High-quality TSRs are characterized by caring, productive, and respectful interactions, a warm and close personal connection, and positive perceptions from both teachers and students (Robinson, 2022). These relationships form the foundation of a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and motivated to succeed. Research consistently highlights positive TSRs as a critical factor in educational outcomes (e.g., Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999). Teachers' and students' perceptions of TSRs have been associated with students' academic achievement, behavior, attendance, and expectations for educational success (Robinson, 2022). Positive TSRs are also linked to fostering a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and engagement, which are essential for academic and social development. Building and maintaining these crucial classroom

relationships is not easy, highlighting the challenges teachers face in cultivating and sustaining meaningful connection (Robinson, 2022).

Attachment theory, initially formulated by John Bowlby in a series of papers starting in the late 1950s and later empirically expanded and refined by Mary Ainsworth through her observational studies in the 1950s and 1960s, provides a psychological framework for understanding the emotional bonds formed between infants and their caregivers (Bowlby 1958; Ainsworth, 1967; Bretherton, 1992). Their joint contributions integrate concepts from ethology, developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis, focusing especially on how early caregiver-infant relationships influence emotional security and social development. These early attachment relationships shape emotional, social, and behavioral development across the lifespan and help explain the significance of secure, supportive TSRs in educational contexts. The existing literature on TSRs aligns with attachment theory and social-emotional learning frameworks, suggesting that positive relationships in the classroom can serve a similar function to secure attachments in early childhood (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). The key principles of attachment theory are: importance of early relationships, attachment as an innate system, secure base and safe haven, internal working models, attachment styles, continuity across the lifespan, role of caregiver sensitivity, and the impact of attachment on development (Bretherton, 1992). Positive TSRs can mirror the secure attachments described in attachment theory, leading to better emotional regulation and behavior in students. Additionally, secure attachment is characterized by a positive emotional bond where the child feels safe and supported by the caregiver. Secure attachment, as defined by Bowlby (1958) in his foundational formulation of attachment theory and further elaborated by Ainsworth (1967) through her empirical work in Uganda, is a crucial

aspect of attachment theory. It describes how children develop a sense of safety and trust in their caregivers, enabling exploration of the environment from a secure base (Bretherton, 1992).

Positive, warm, and supportive teacher-student relationships are essential and align with the principles of attachment theory, which suggest that secure relationships can foster better emotional and behavioral outcomes for students (Thornberg et al., 2020). Attachment styles developed in early relationships can influence interpersonal relationships later in life, including those in educational settings. Positive TSRs can serve as a secure base for students, much like secure attachments formed in early childhood. When students perceive their teachers as supportive and caring, they are more likely to engage positively in the classroom, an idea that aligns closely with the principles of attachment theory. The quality and effectiveness of these relationships depend on the perceptions of both teachers and students, underscoring the importance of mutual understanding in fostering positive TSRs (Robinson, 2022). Further, the quality of TSRs is foundational to students' social-emotional development, as supported by attachment theory. Chen and colleagues (2021) emphasize that positive relationships foster emotional security, which is essential for effective learning. Research has shown that children with secure attachments are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors, emotional stability, and resilience in various social contexts (Bretherton, 1992). Just as secure attachments with caregivers promote healthy development in children, in the context of education, the principles of attachment theory suggest that when teachers establish secure, supportive relationships with their students, they can significantly influence students' emotional and behavioral development. Thus, positive TSRs have the potential to enhance students' engagement, motivation, and overall behavior in the classroom.

Role of teachers in building relationships

Positive TSRs are associated with improved student engagement, academic achievement, behavioral regulation, and overall well-being (Roorda et al., 2011). While the benefits of TSRs are widely acknowledged, the responsibility for initiating and nurturing these relationships rests heavily on the teacher. Building and maintaining high-quality TSRs requires intentional effort, reflection, and skill, especially when working with students who exhibit behavioral or academic challenges (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Teachers play a critical role in creating emotionally supportive environments that promote trust, respect, and mutual understanding. When teachers demonstrate kindness, fairness, and consistency, students report feeling safer and more motivated to participate in classroom activities (Thornberg et al., 2020). This is particularly important for students with learning difficulties or at-risk behaviors, for whom a positive TSR can serve as a protective factor against disengagement, aggression, or social-emotional challenges (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Facilitating social-emotional learning (SEL) is one of the most effective ways teachers can actively foster teacher-student relationships. Teachers who are trained in SEL are better equipped to support students' emotional development and respond to their social needs, which helps build more effective TSRs (Raimundo et al., 2024). However, many educators report feeling unprepared to address students' emotional challenges, which can hinder their ability to form meaningful relationships and manage classrooms effectively. This lack of preparedness contributes to higher stress and burnout among teachers, highlighting the critical need for relationship-focused and social-emotional learning training to support both teacher well-being and student outcomes (Oliveira et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Professional development programs that include SEL components, such as the 16-hour training referenced in a recent SEL

program have been shown to improve teacher confidence and lead to positive outcomes like enhanced emotional regulation, social competence, and psychological adjustment in students (Raimundo et al., 2024).

In addition to training, teachers' beliefs and expectations play a critical role in shaping TSRs. Teachers often invest more relational energy in students they believe will succeed, potentially leading to disparities in relationship quality (Robinson, 2022). To build equitable relationships, teachers must reflect on their own assumptions and biases and commit to forming connections with all students, especially those who may be marginalized, disengaged, or struggling (Robinson, 2022). Ultimately, the teacher is not just a facilitator of instruction, but a relational leader in the classroom. Through consistent emotional support, culturally responsive communication, and reflective practice, teachers have the power to shape student behavior, motivation, and long-term success through the relationships they build.

Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior

Teacher-student relationships significantly influence student behavior, shaping academic engagement, emotional well-being, and classroom interactions. Research consistently shows that positive relationships can serve as protective factors against behavioral challenges, promote a supportive classroom climate, and encourage constructive student participation (Hamre and Pianta, 2005; Sabol and Pianta, 2012; Buyse et al., 2008; Pianta & Allen, 2008). These relationships foster trust, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to improved student behavior. Conversely, negative or strained TSRs can exacerbate behavioral issues, increase disengagement, and lead to higher instances of conflict and disciplinary action. Students who feel misunderstood, unsupported, or unfairly treated may exhibit defiance, withdrawal, or disruptive behavior as a response (Sabol and Pianta, 2012; Hamre and Pianta,

2005; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Decker et al., 2007). This section reviews the evidence on how the quality of TSRs- both positive and negative- affects various aspects of student behavior, including disciplinary issues, engagement, and overall classroom dynamics.

Behavioral outcomes linked to positive relationships

The quality of TSRs plays a critical role in shaping student behavior within the classroom. Supportive and trusting relationships with teachers are associated with positive behavioral outcomes, including increased engagement, self-regulation, cooperation, and motivation. These behaviors may be observed through increased task completion, more appropriate peer interactions, fewer classroom disruptions, and reduced reliance on disciplinary interventions. These outcomes contribute to students' academic, social and emotional development (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Positive TSRs help reduce disruptive behaviors by fostering emotional security, a sense of belonging, and mutual respect. Research has shown that when students feel respected and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to demonstrate cooperative behavior and participate actively in class (Thornberg et al., 2020). Positive, warm, and supportive TSRs provide students with a safe and caring environment where they feel acknowledged as individuals, which in turn strengthens their emotional and behavioral engagement in learning activities. These relationships are especially influential for students with behavioral or social difficulties. Students who face behavioral challenges often show significant improvement when positive TSRs are present, particularly when teachers are trained in relationship-building strategies, such as those taught through Child-Teacher Relationship Training, which enhance connection and reduce externalizing behavioral problems (Helker & Ray, 2009). For example, a student with a history of disruptive behavior who developed a close, supportive relationship with a consistent teacher showed noticeable improvements in class

participation and emotional regulation over time. Teacher training programs that focus on relationships-building skills have been shown to not only improve the quality of teacher-student interactions but also decrease externalizing behaviors across classroom settings (Helker & Ray, 2009).

The influence of TSRs is also bidirectional, student behavior affects the teacher-student dynamic, and the quality of that relationship, in turn, shapes future behavioral outcomes. Positive TSRs have been linked to reduced aggression and may even help redirect the behavioral trajectories of at-risk students (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). When students feel supported and understood, they are more likely to develop trust in their teacher, leading to improved behavior and greater emotional investment in learning. Positive TSRs have been associated with behavioral and academic success across grade levels and student demographics. Students with social and behavioral difficulties show particular improvement when supported by nurturing teacher relationships (Baker, 2006). In early childhood settings, especially kindergarten, TSRs characterized by closeness, warmth, and low conflict lay the foundation for long-term behavioral engagement and academic adjustment (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). When students experience these high-quality relationships early on, the positive effects can persist throughout their schooling and continue to influence classroom behavior and attitudes toward learning as they grow more independent. Longitudinal studies also suggest that students who develop early TSRs are more likely to maintain prosocial behavior, avoid school disciplinary systems, and demonstrate resilience in future educational settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Taken together, these findings underscore that positive TSRs not only improve classroom behavior but also serve as a foundation for students' long-term emotional growth and academic success.

Behavioral outcomes linked to negative relationships

While positive TSRs are associated with several behavioral benefits, the absence of such connections or the presence of negative relationships can have detrimental effects on student behavior. When students perceive their teachers as indifferent, unfair, or hostile, they are more likely to exhibit disruptive behaviors such as defiance, disengagement, or aggression (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). These strained relationships often erode trust, increase emotional distress, and foster classroom environments marked by tensions and conflict. As a result, students in negative TSRs are more frequently subject to disciplinary referrals, reduced motivation, and compromised social-emotional functioning (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015).

Negative TSRs often develop in classrooms where the relational climate is characterized by hostility, lack of support, or persistent miscommunication. In these settings, students are more likely to display behaviors such as arguing, talking out of turn, or acting aggressively, which in turn disrupt the learning environment and challenge classroom management (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). Students who exhibit antisocial or aggressive behaviors are also at heightened risk for forming negative relationships with their teachers, creating a reciprocal cycle in which challenging behavior provokes negative teacher responses, and those responses further escalate student behavior (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Externalizing behaviors, including aggression and hyperactivity, are frequently both a cause and consequence of negative TSRs (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Meehan et al., 2003; Doumen et al., 2008). These patterns align with principles from attachment theory, which suggests that students who lack secure, supportive adult relationships may struggle with emotional regulation and are more likely to express distress through behavioral challenges.

In addition to externalized behaviors, negative TSRs can also significantly impact student motivation and engagement. Students who feel disconnected from their teachers often demonstrate lower interest in classroom activities and reduced effort on academic tasks (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). This disengagement may take the form of withdrawal, passivity, or inattentiveness, particularly among students who feel emotionally unsupported or misunderstood. Over time, this lack of connection can lead to worsening behavior as students attempt to cope with unmet relational needs or seek attention in maladaptive ways (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The absence of a secure, trusting relationship with a teacher, a role attachment theory views as analogous to that of a caregiver, can contribute to feelings of isolation, rejection, and emotional insecurity, which often manifest behaviorally.

The long-term consequences of negative TSRs extend beyond classroom disruptions. Students who experience conflictual or distant relationships with teachers are more likely to struggle with behavioral adjustment and school engagement throughout their academic journey (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Conversely, research has shown that students with access to warm, supportive relationships are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors and maintain long-term emotional and behavioral stability (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Meehan et al., 2003). These findings highlight the essential role of emotionally secure relationships in the classroom, supporting not only students' academic achievement but also their behavioral development and overall well-being.

Teacher Motivations and Strategies for Cultivating Relationships

Despite the challenges, many teachers are motivated to prioritize relationship-building as a central component of their practice. Intrinsic factors, such as a commitment to student success, and extrinsic factors, such as institutional goals, drive their efforts to establish meaningful

connections with students. This section delves into the motivations that guide teachers' relationship-building efforts and the strategies they employ to foster trust, communication, and engagement. From culturally responsive teaching to proactive classroom management techniques, the discussion provides a comprehensive overview of effective practices.

Intrinsic Motivations

Teachers often build relationships with students not because they are required to, but because they find deep personal fulfillment in doing so. Intrinsic motivations, such as passion for teaching, a desire to positively impact students' lives, and a belief in the transformative power of relationships, drive many educators to invest time and effort into fostering meaningful connections (Watt & Richardson, 2007). These internal motivations stem from a commitment to student growth, emotional well-being, and academic success. When teachers view relationship-building as part of their professional responsibility, they are more likely to invest effort in engaging meaningfully with students (Robinson, 2022). This belief is often shaped by personal experiences or a desire to support student well-being and success. Positive TSRs are associated not only with improved student achievement and engagement but also with enhanced teacher well-being (Robinson, 2022). Research indicates that fostering emotional connections is crucial for student development and can be effectively promoted through professional development focusing on care, empathy, and social support (Anderson et al., 2004; Pianta et al., 2008).

One key concept to consider is relational self-efficacy, which refers to teachers' beliefs in their ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with students. Teachers who possess high levels of relational self-efficacy are more motivated to engage in relationship-building behaviors, as their confidence influences their willingness to act on their values and beliefs (Robinson, 2022). When teachers experience success in connecting with students, it can

reinforce a cycle of motivation, encouraging them to continue prioritizing these efforts. Positive TSRs are a central component emphasized in person-centered education models and are fundamental to establishing trust, care, and engagement in learning, reflecting an intrinsic motivation for educators to foster such connections (Cornelius-White, 2007).

When teachers experience a sense of emotional reward from their interactions with students, it can strengthen their intrinsic motivation to maintain and deepen these relationships over time (Watt & Richardson, 2007; Robinson, 2022; Valli & Buese, 2007). Positive teacher-student interactions not only benefit students but also enhance teachers' well-being and job satisfaction, creating a positive feedback loop that reinforces their commitment to relationship-building (Robinson, 2022). The quality of TSRs is also closely tied to the emotional investment teachers make in their students' well-being and success. Teachers who feel a genuine connection and sense of responsibility toward their students are more likely to foster positive interactions and create supportive classroom environments (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Teachers who are motivated by intrinsic values may perceive their role not just as providers of knowledge, but as key figures in students' social and emotional development. This perspective aligns with relational practices in which teachers are viewed as critical agents of change capable of positively influencing students' lives. Positive teacher-student interactions can promote not only students' academic performance but also teachers' emotional well-being, creating a reciprocal benefit that underscores the intrinsic rewards of cultivating classroom relationships (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Extrinsic Motivations

While many teachers are intrinsically driven to build positive relationships with students, external factors also play a significant role in shaping their efforts. Institutional expectations,

school policies, professional evaluations, and broader educational goals often encourage teachers to prioritize relationship-building as a means to improve student behavior, engagement, and academic performance. Additionally, support from administrators, professional development opportunities, and school culture can reinforce the importance of fostering positive teacher-student connections.

External influences such as school policies, performance evaluations, and accountability measures can affect how teachers approach relationship-building with students (Robinson, 2022; Valli & Buese, 2007). Recognition from administrators, positive evaluations, or acknowledgment from colleagues can serve as powerful motivators for teachers to prioritize developing positive TSRs. External validation has been shown to enhance teachers' sense of efficacy and strengthen their professional commitment (Robinson, 2022). In schools where relational work is celebrated and formally recognized, educators may feel more encouraged to invest in cultivating quality relationships with students. Teachers who receive praise or incentives for building effective TSRs are often more motivated to continue these practices in their classrooms (Robinson, 2022).

Another factor to consider is the impact of educational policies and accountability measures as extrinsic motivators. Policies that prioritize SEL or mandate relationship-building initiatives can compel teachers to engage more intentionally in developing TSRs (Robinson, 2022). Educational policies and accountability measures that emphasize sustained teacher-student interactions can influence extrinsic motivation by shaping the quality of TSRs. Positive relationships with teachers have been shown to support children's academic achievement and behavioral adjustment, suggesting that policies promoting stable and supportive classroom environments may enhance student motivation and school success (Baker, 2006). When a school emphasizes TSRs in student performance assessments, teachers may be incentivized to focus on

these relationships to align with institutional goals. Additionally, teachers may feel motivated to improve their relationships with students to meet performance metrics linked to job security, promotions, or professional reputation.

Collaboration with colleagues can also serve as an extrinsic motivator. Participation in professional learning communities or collaborative teaching models encourages teachers to focus on building TSRs through shared goals and communal accountability. When a school culture promotes collective efforts toward enhancing student relationships, teachers may feel externally motivated to contribute to these initiatives to maintain group cohesion and professional respect.

Moreover, the consequences of not cultivating TSRs can serve as a powerful extrinsic motivator. Educators who understand that negative relationships may lead to classroom disruptions or decreased student engagement may feel a need to proactively foster supportive interactions. Positive TSRs have been shown to uniquely predict improvements in students' psychosocial functioning and academic performance (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Baker, 2006). This perspective suggests that teachers may be motivated to build relationships not only for personal or intrinsic reasons, but also to prevent behavioral challenges and protect classroom effectiveness and professional evaluations.

Strategies for Cultivating Relationships

Understanding TSRs through the lens of attachment theory emphasizes the emotional and relational components of teaching. This perspective highlights that students' behavior and academic performance are closely connected to the sense of security, trust, and connection they feel with their teachers. Applying attachment theory to classroom practice helps guide educators in fostering positive TSRs and improving behavioral and academic outcomes through intentional relationship-based strategies. Building positive, supportive relationships is essential for

enhancing student engagement, motivation, and overall academic success. Pianta and Nimetz (1991) identified that TSRs characterized by security are positively associated with better behavioral adjustment in children.

One foundational strategy for cultivating TSRs is the provision of emotional support. Teachers can demonstrate care and concern through verbal affirmations, empathetic listening, and responsive interactions. For example, acknowledging students' feelings and lived experiences helps create a classroom environment that feels emotionally safe and supportive (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Ahnert et al., 2006). Such consistent emotional reinforcement lays the groundwork for mutual trust and relational security.

Establishing predictable routines and promoting active engagement are also key strategies. Predictable classroom structures enhance students' sense of stability and help them feel more comfortable interacting with their teacher. Routine-based interactions have been shown to foster engagement and cooperation by creating a stable, reliable learning environment (La Paro et al., 2004; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Additionally, incorporating interactive and participatory activities, such as class discussions, peer collaboration, or hands-on learning, encourages open communication and helps build rapport.

Another effective practice is incorporating multiple perspectives into relationship-building. Teachers can strengthen TSRs by soliciting feedback from students, families, and colleagues about their relational practices. Understanding students' perceptions of the classroom climate and their relationship with the teacher enables educators to make informed adjustments to their approach (Brok et al., 2006; Helmke and Lenske, 2013). Data-driven reflection can help teachers identify what is working and where gaps in connection may exist, allowing for more responsive and inclusive strategies (Robinson, 2022).

Professional development focused on relational practices is also critical. Training programs that emphasize the importance of TSRs can enhance educators' interpersonal skills and their capacity to connect with diverse learners. Workshops that include strategies for effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional responsiveness are particularly beneficial (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In addition, collaborative planning sessions and peer-led learning communities offer valuable opportunities for teachers to share successful practices and support one another in refining relational approaches (Robinson, 2022).

Creating a supportive classroom climate is another essential component. When teachers intentionally foster an environment built on respect, empathy, and collaboration, students are more likely to feel valued and included (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). A warm and inclusive climate, where students feel safe expressing themselves, strengthens the foundation for relational trust (Robinson, 2022).

Incorporating student-centered approaches can further enhance TSRs. Practices such as personalized feedback, regular check-ins, and recognizing individual strengths help foster a sense of belonging. When students feel their opinions and preferences are valued, such as being invited to provide input on class rules or learning topics, they are more likely to develop trust and ownership of their educational experience, consistent with insights from Pianta & Allen (2008).

Cultivating positive TSRs requires intentional, ongoing effort by educators. By focusing on emotional support, predictable routines, multiple perspectives, targeted professional development, supportive classroom climate, and student-centered practices, teachers can significantly improve the quality of their relationships with students. These strategies not only support positive educational outcomes but also create a more collaborative and emotionally enriching learning environment for all.

Implications for Classroom Management and Student Behavior

The impact of TSRs extends beyond individual interactions, shaping the broader dynamics of classroom management and behavior. A well-established relationship can improve classroom cohesion, reduce disciplinary incidents, and promote a culture of respect and mutual understanding. This section explores the implications of positive TSRs for classroom management strategies, highlighting how these relationships can be leveraged to create a more structured and supportive learning environment.

Proactive Classroom Management

Effective classroom management is rooted in proactive strategies that help prevent behavioral issues before they even occur. Positive TSRs serve as the foundation for these preventative approaches by fostering trust, consistency, and mutual respect. When students feel understood and valued, they are more likely to meet behavioral expectations and engage in the learning process. The quality of TSRs is closely intertwined with classroom climate and management strategies. Fostering positive relationships contributes to a more supportive and conducive learning environment, which can enhance classroom management and reduce behavioral issues. Establishing warm, trusting, and supportive connections with students is a key component in creating this positive atmosphere (Thornberg et al., 2020). When teachers do this, it creates an environment that is more conducive to learning and less prone to disruptions. Creating this environment allows teachers to manage classrooms effectively, as students are more likely to respect and adhere to classroom rules and expectations when they feel connected to their teacher. This subsection explores how relationship-centered practices support proactive classroom management by emphasizing clear communication, positive reinforcement, and the

implementation of classroom procedures and routines that promote student accountability and ultimately help minimize disruptions.

Classroom management is broadly defined as “the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning” (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). This concept emphasizes prevention through planning, and it incorporates the essential features of classroom organization, management, and discipline (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). Proactive classroom management involves strategies that prevent disruptive behavior and promote a positive learning environment through building positive relationships between teachers and students. By anticipating potential challenges and addressing them early, teachers can create an atmosphere conducive to learning (Chen et al., 2021). Successful classroom management involves more than procedural control, it also requires building personal relationships with students. Establishing care and supportive connections is a key responsibility of teachers, as it fosters a sense of trust and community within the classroom (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). TSRs characterized by a high degree of teacher influence and proximity have been shown to reduce classroom disruptions, such as aggressive behavior, while promoting socially appropriate student conduct. Positive TSRs are associated with increased student motivation, academic performance, engagement in learning activities, and adherence to classroom rules and norms, all of which contribute to effective classroom management (Roorda et al., 2011; Robinson, 2022; Buyse et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2021). In recent studies, proactive classroom management has been identified as a vital component in fostering positive TSRs, which ultimately influences student behavior. Indeed, research indicates that positive TSRs are fundamental to effective proactive classroom management. Teachers in early childhood settings have emphasized that nurturing relationships with students not only promote emotional security

but also increase engagement in learning, which in turn helps reduce disruptive behaviors (Chen et al., 2021). Effective classroom management plays a critical role in creating an environment that supports academic achievement. Research has shown that teachers' beliefs about their ability to manage classroom behavior are essential, with both pre-service and in-service teachers expressing confidence in their classroom management skills (Rosas & West, 2009). The study also highlighted differences in belief systems between pre-service and in-service teachers, suggesting that experience influences perceptions of effective behavior management (Rosas & West, 2009). Pre-service teachers often had naive beliefs around classroom management which led to an overreliance on control measures rather than proactive strategies. In contrast, experienced teachers had more realistic expectations regarding classroom management. Instead of relying heavily on control measures they adapted more proactive measures and focused on cultivating classroom environments that helped promote positive interactions and student engagement. This leads to the realization that teachers' preparedness in proactive classroom management can be strengthened through targeted training in their educator preparation programs. The research indicates that increased emphasis on proactive strategies within teacher training could lead to an overall improvement in classroom climate and student behavior, which is critical for fostering positive student-teacher interactions.

The reciprocal influence between TSRs and student behavior plays a critical role in effective classroom dynamics. Positive teacher perceptions of student behavior can actively shape the classroom environment and align with the principles of proactive classroom management, which emphasizes cultivating an inclusive climate where students feel valued and understood (Chen et al., 2021). In their study, teachers reported using various relationship-building strategies, such as recognizing individual student differences and engaging

meaningfully with each child to build rapport. These strategies align with proactive classroom management approaches that focus on creating supportive environments to prevent misbehavior rather than simply responding to it (Chen et al., 2021). Positive TSRs significantly enhance proactive classroom management by mitigating disruptive behaviors and fostering a more enriching and emotionally secure learning experience. These findings highlight the importance of positive relationships as a foundational strategy for maintaining an effective and inclusive classroom (Chen et. al., 2021).

Challenges to Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Building and maintaining positive TSRs is not without its challenges. Teachers often encounter obstacles such as time constraints and a lack of training in relationship-building techniques, despite the recognized importance of TSRs (Chen et al., 2021). These barriers can hinder the implementation of effective proactive management strategies, underscoring the need for professional development that equips teachers with the skills to build and maintain positive relationships underpinning classroom discipline. Teachers also face large class sizes, cultural differences, and lack of institutional support. These other challenges can hinder their ability to connect meaningfully with students and address behavioral concerns effectively. This section examines the obstacles teachers face in fostering relationships, with an emphasis on systemic and contextual factors. It also explores how these barriers impact their ability to influence student behavior and maintain a cohesive classroom environment.

System Barriers

Many of the challenges teachers face in building positive TSRs stem from broader systemic issues embedded within schools and education policy. Institutional pressures, such as rigid curricula, high-stakes testing, and standardized performance measures, often leave teachers

with limited flexibility to engage in relational work. These environments prioritize measurable academic outcomes over interpersonal development, reducing time and incentive for teachers to nurture individual student connections (Pianta & Allen, 2008; Robinson, 2022).

Teachers operating within underfunded or inequitable school systems often face overcrowded classrooms, limited access to materials, and insufficient professional development, all of which hinder relationship-building efforts. These constraints are especially pronounced in schools serving historically marginalized communities, where resource inequity can exacerbate the challenges of addressing students' emotional and behavioral needs (Sandholtz, 2002; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Without adequate training or relational resources, even well-intentioned educators may feel unprepared to engage effectively with every student.

Cultural disconnects and a lack of preparation for engaging with diverse student populations present further systemic barriers. Many teachers are not adequately trained in culturally responsive practices, which can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations of behavior, and relational distance, especially with students from marginalized backgrounds (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). These gaps in understanding often stem from broader institutional failures, such as teacher preparation programs that do not fully address relational and cultural competencies (Robinson, 2022).

In addition, systemic inconsistencies in behavior policies and school-wide support systems can limit teachers' relational capacity. In schools where expectations around discipline and student support vary or are unclear, teachers may feel uncertain about how to respond to students' social-emotional needs (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). This can lead to reactive or authoritarian management styles, which may further alienate students and hinder trust-building (Thornberg et al., 2020).

Teacher-Related Challenges

While systemic and institutional barriers shape the context in which teachers work, individual-level challenges can also hinder the development of positive TSRs. Factors such as time constraints, stress, limited relational training, personal beliefs, and emotional exhaustion may reduce teachers' capacity to engage consistently and meaningfully with students (Chen et al., 2021). Even educators who value relationships may struggle to sustain them amid the competing demands of instructional delivery, classroom management, and administrative tasks.

Time constraints are one of the most commonly reported challenges. The pressure to meet curriculum pacing, prepare students for standardized tests, and manage classroom behavior can limit teachers' opportunities to connect with students on a personal level. In fast-paced environments, teachers may struggle to learn about students' individual needs, backgrounds, and personalities, elements that are crucial for building rapport (Thornberg et al., 2020; Robinson, 2022). Many educators also report losing instructional time due to classroom disruptions and administrative responsibilities, which further reduces the space available for personal interactions (OECD, 2014; Vieluf et al., 2012).

In tandem with time limitation, resource scarcity, whether financial, material, or emotional, can strain teachers' ability to build positive TSRs. When schools lack funding or staffing, teachers are often left without the tools or support necessary to create nurturing environments. Moreover, accountability pressures tied to high-stakes testing may cause educators to prioritize academic performance over relational development, weakening efforts to establish trust and engagement with students (Robinson, 2022).

Teachers' motivation and self-efficacy also play a critical role in their relationship-building practices. Educators who believe that forming relationships is central to their

professional identity, and who feel confident in their ability to do so, are more likely to invest in those efforts (Robinson, 2022). However, when teachers doubt their ability to connect with students or question whether relationship-building is part of their role, they may disengage from this aspect of teaching. Low relational self-efficacy can lead to inconsistent efforts and missed opportunities to form meaningful bonds with students.

Personal characteristics, such as empathy, patience, and fairness, are also essential in developing TSRs. Yet not all teachers may naturally exhibit these traits or may struggle to express them. Educators who are less attuned to students' emotional cues or needs may find it more difficult to connect. These gaps can result in misinterpretation of student behavior, frustration, and ultimately a relational disconnect (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018).

Teachers' perceptions and expectations can also affect the quality of their relationships with students. For instance, educators may unintentionally invest more time and energy in students they perceive as academically promising, while overlooking those who struggle or come from marginalized backgrounds (Robinson, 2022). This perception-based bias can contribute to a relationship gap, where students most in need of support receive the least. Additionally, teachers and students often differ in how they interpret classroom behavior. Discrepancies in what constitutes disruption or respect can lead to misunderstandings and conflict, especially if teachers are not trained to recognize behaviors through a culturally or developmentally informed lens (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018).

Some educators may also hesitate to build emotional connections with students due to beliefs about professionalism or authority. Teachers who view their role strictly through an academic lens may fear that forming close relationships could undermine classroom discipline or

blur professional boundaries (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This reluctance can create distance, limiting the development of trust and connection. Others may overemphasize structure and control, overlooking the emotional and relational needs that students bring to the classroom (Chen et al., 2021).

Teacher stress and burnout further compound these challenges. The demands of teaching, academic pressures, emotional labor, behavioral management, can lead to fatigue, frustration, and emotional withdrawal. Teachers experiencing high levels of stress may unintentionally project negativity or become less emotionally available to students, making it more difficult to sustain supportive relationships (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). Emotional exhaustion can affect a teacher's consistency, tone, and responsiveness, key components of trust-building in the classroom (Pianta et al., 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). When teachers are unable to provide consistent support, students may feel uncertain or disconnected, which undermines relational development.

Teacher related challenges, ranging from time and resource constraints to emotional exhaustion and self-doubt, significantly interfere with the establishment and maintenance of positive TSRs. Addressing these internal barriers requires not only individual reflection but also institutional support structures that promote teacher well-being, cultural responsiveness, and relational skill development.

Student-Related Challenges

In addition to systemic and teacher-related obstacles, student-specific factors can present unique challenges to building positive TSRs. Students come to the classroom with diverse backgrounds, emotional needs, and life experiences that shape how they respond to relational efforts. Factors such as trauma, behavioral challenges, emotional regulation difficulties, and

cultural disconnects can significantly influence students' ability or willingness to form meaningful connections with teachers.

One major challenge arises from students who carry relational trauma. Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences or unstable relationships often struggle with trust and attachment, making it more difficult to connect with adults in school settings (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Students who have experienced trauma may exhibit behaviors such as withdrawal, resistance, or aggression, which can unintentionally hinder the development of positive relationships with teachers (Avery et al., 2020). Research also indicates that early attachment relationships, particularly with caregivers, significantly influence how students relate to teachers and other adults later in life (Fonagy et al., 2003). For example, students with less secure child-caregiver relationships who also experience low-quality TSRs are more likely to demonstrate aggression or antisocial behaviors in the classroom (McGrath & Bergen, 2015).

Behavioral challenges, whether linked to trauma or other factors, further complicate relationship-building. Students who are disruptive, aggressive, or disengaged may inadvertently strain interactions with teachers, making it more difficult to establish trust (Thornberg et al., 2020). Disruptive behaviors are often met with disciplinary responses, which can further damage fragile relationships. Yet, research underscores that these students are often the ones most in need of supportive adult connections (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Without intentional efforts to view these behaviors through a lens of empathy and support, the likelihood of developing positive TSRs remains low.

Social-emotional difficulties, such as anxiety, low self-esteem, or poor emotional regulation, also influence students' capacity to form relationships. Students who struggle in these areas may misinterpret teacher intentions, withdraw from interactions, or respond defensively to

feedback (Chen et al., 2021, Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Communication difficulties are common among trauma-impacted students, who may lack the confidence, vocabulary, or emotional regulation skills needed to express themselves in ways that build trust. These barriers can be particularly challenging for teachers to navigate without specialized training or ongoing support (Avery et al., 2020). For instance, a student experiencing anxiety may avoid class participation, limiting opportunities for teachers to build rapport and offer affirmation.

Another critical challenge involves the mismatch between students' cultural or social backgrounds and teachers' expectations. Students from historically marginalized communities may enter classrooms with a justified sense of skepticism, especially if previous experiences have included bias or exclusion (McGrath & Bergen, 2015). Children's early interactions with authority figures, including caregivers and past educators, can shape how they perceive and respond to teachers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). When teachers are unaware of or unresponsive to these contextual factors, it can lead to relational disconnects. Students who feel their identities are misunderstood or ignored may be less willing to engage, making it difficult for trusting relationships to develop.

External factors such as poverty, family instability, and social exclusion also impact students' emotional readiness for relational engagement. These challenges can manifest as low motivation, disengagement, or behavioral outbursts, which teachers may misinterpret as defiance rather than signs of distress (Lawson & Lawson, 2020). For example, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be perceived as aggressive, an implicit bias that can reinforce negative relationship cycles and limit opportunities for connection (McGrath & Bergen, 2015).

Student-related challenges to relationship-building are complex and multifaceted. Trauma, behavior, emotional regulation, cultural disconnection, and socioeconomic stressors all interact to shape how students experience TSRs. Teachers must approach these relationships with empathy, cultural competence, and intentionality to ensure that students' unique experiences do not become insurmountable barriers to connection.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how TSRs are developed and how they influence student behavior and classroom dynamics, this study is grounded in Robinson's (2022) Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships (TSRs) Framework. This framework emphasizes the role of teachers' motivational beliefs, specifically their value for relationships, their self-efficacy in building them, and their sense of responsibility, in shaping relational behaviors and the overall quality of TSRs. Robinson's framework provides a lens through which to examine not only why teachers choose to invest in relationships with students, but also how those motivations impact classroom management and student outcomes. While Robinson's framework serves as the primary foundation for this study, attachment theory offers important conceptual support. Attachment theory helps explain the underlying emotional and psychological dynamics that influence how students form relationships with adults, including teachers. Students with secure attachment histories may be more likely to engage positively in classroom relationships, while those with insecure or disrupted attachments may face challenges in building trust. Understanding these dynamics enhances the interpretation of teacher-student interactions, especially when considering the barriers some students face in forming positive connections. By anchoring this study in the Motivating TSRs Framework and acknowledging the insights offered by attachment

theory, this section provides a comprehensive foundation for exploring the development, influence, and challenges of TSRs from the teacher's perspective.

Robinson (2022) proposes that the quality of TSRs (TSRs) is largely influenced by teachers' motivational beliefs, which are shaped by their sociocultural contexts. Central to this theory are three categories of beliefs that motivate teachers' behavior in building TSRs: 1) Roles: Teachers' beliefs about their responsibilities and roles in relation to students, 2) Values: The importance teachers assign to TSRs and their perceived benefits, and 3) Self-efficacy: Teachers' confidence in their ability to establish and sustain positive relationships (see Figure 2.1). These beliefs are not static; they are influenced by broader sociocultural contexts, such as school policies, societal stereotypes, and professional norms. A teacher's role is their belief about what their responsibilities and obligations are concerning relationships with students. This is rooted in role theory, which posits that individuals' behavior is guided by their understanding of their social roles. If teachers perceive relationship-building as part of their professional identity, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that foster positive TSRs. The belief that developing relationships is integral to effective teaching. Teachers who do not see relationship-building as part of their role may overlook it or do it superficially. Emphasizing relational roles in teacher training can motivate more genuine relationship efforts. Values toward TSRs refer to the degree of importance teachers place on cultivating these relationships and their beliefs about the benefits such connections bring to both students and themselves. This is based on motivation theories emphasizing the role of value in energizing behavior. Teachers who value TSRs are more likely to invest effort and persistence. Values toward TSRs encompass beliefs about the positive impact of TSRs on student engagement, motivation, and achievement; a personal commitment to qualities such as caring, empathy, and connection; and cultural beliefs that emphasize the

importance of relational dynamics in educational settings. Cultivating positive values regarding TSRs can lead to more deliberate and sustained efforts. Interventions may focus on highlighting the benefits and importance of supportive relationships for student success. Relational self-efficacy refers to teachers' confidence in their ability to establish, maintain, and repair positive relationships with students, which influences their willingness to engage in relational practices. This is grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, where self-efficacy influences motivation and behavior. Teachers with high relational self-efficacy are more likely to persist in relationship-building, especially in challenging situations. Boosting relational self-efficacy through professional development can lead to more proactive relationship-building. High self-efficacy reduces burnout and increases resilience when facing relational challenges.

However, these are all influenced by sociocultural contexts such as school environment, societal stereotypes, and policies that shape teachers' beliefs and behaviors. Grounded in ecological systems theory, this dimension recognizes that teachers operate within interconnected systems where external factors significantly influence internal motivations and actions. For example, administrative support, school climate, and professional norms can either encourage or constrain relationship-building efforts. Policies that prioritize academic performance and standardized testing may inadvertently devalue the relational aspects of teaching. Additionally, societal stereotypes related to race, gender, and culture can shape teachers' expectations and interactions with students, often in ways that are unintentional yet impactful. These sociocultural pressures and expectations contribute to the complex environment in which TSRs are formed and maintained, influencing not only what teachers believe about relationships, but also how they enact those beliefs in their daily practice. Effective interventions need to address not just

individual beliefs but also modify contextual influences. Challenging stereotypes and creating supportive policies can enhance teachers' motivation and capacity for relationship-building.

The components of Robinson's (2022) Motivating TSRs Frameworks, values towards TSRs, relational self-efficacy, and sociocultural contexts, are deeply interconnected and collectively shape teachers' motivation and capacity to build meaningful relationships with students. Teachers' beliefs about the value and purpose of relationships influence whether they view relational work as central to their professional identity. Relational self-efficacy, or the confidence teachers have in their ability to build and sustain positive relationships, determines whether they act on those values, especially when facing relational or behavioral challenges. These internal beliefs and capabilities do not operate in isolation; they are continually shaped by the broader sociocultural context in which teachers work. Institutional policies, school climate, and societal expectations can either support or hinder relationship-building efforts. Together, these interwoven components provide a nuanced understanding of how and why teachers engage in relationship-building practices and offer a robust foundation for exploring the relational dynamics that influence student behavior.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter underscored the crucial role that TSRs play in shaping student behavior, classroom dynamics, and overall academic success. Through an exploration of theoretical frameworks, motivational factors, management strategies, and the challenges teachers face, this chapter highlights the complexity and importance of these relationships from the teacher's perspective. While research declared the benefits of positive teacher-student interactions, it also revealed gaps, particularly in understanding how teachers navigate barriers and keep meaningful connections among systemic constraints. These findings

provided the foundation for this study, which sought to deepen our understanding of the motivations, experiences, and challenges teachers encounter as they work to build and maintain supportive relationships with their students.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used to examine elementary school teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) on student behavior. Building on existing literature that highlights the importance of TSRs for student success, this study responded to the need for a deeper understanding of how teachers understand, implement, and evaluate relationship-building strategies in their classrooms and how these relationships influenced student behavioral outcomes. While past research has demonstrated the significance of TSRs for academic and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999), limited attention has been paid to how teachers themselves navigate the challenges, strategies, and outcomes of relationship-building within elementary school settings (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

To address this gap, the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches in two distinct phases. The first phase gathered survey data from elementary teachers that identified broad patterns in their perceptions of TSRs and how these relationships influenced student behavior. The second phase built upon the survey results by conducting semi-structured interviews that explored the deeper, contextualized experiences of selected teachers. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of both the general trends and the nuanced, relational work teachers undertake to cultivate positive classroom environments. The remainder of this chapter outlines the study's research design, setting, participant sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods. The following research questions reflect the study's focus and are categorized by phase to align with the mixed-methods framework.

The primary *quantitative research question* is:

- How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on their students' classroom behavior?

Supporting the primary quantitative research question, the following sub-questions were explored:

1. To what extent do elementary teachers believe positive teacher-student relationships reduce instances of disruptive behavior in the classroom?
2. How do elementary teachers rate the importance of various relationship-building practices in fostering positive behavior?

The primary *qualitative research question* is:

- What motivates elementary teachers to engage in relationship-building practices, and how do they perceive its impact on classroom behavior?

Supporting the primary qualitative research question, the following sub-questions were explored:

1. What challenges and tensions do elementary teachers face when building positive relationships with students, and how do they overcome these barriers and address these challenges?
2. How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of their relationship-building efforts of student behavior and classroom management?

The mixed-methods research question, integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings is:

- How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior, and what factors explain the observed patterns in these perceptions?

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological approach used to address the research questions. It begins by describing the rationale for selecting an explanatory mixed-

methods design and how it aligned with the study's objectives. Following this, the chapter details the research context, participant selection, data collection methods, and analysis procedures. The discussion concludes with an explanation of the reliability and validity of the quantitative phase, and an explanation of the consistency and trustworthiness of the qualitative phase.

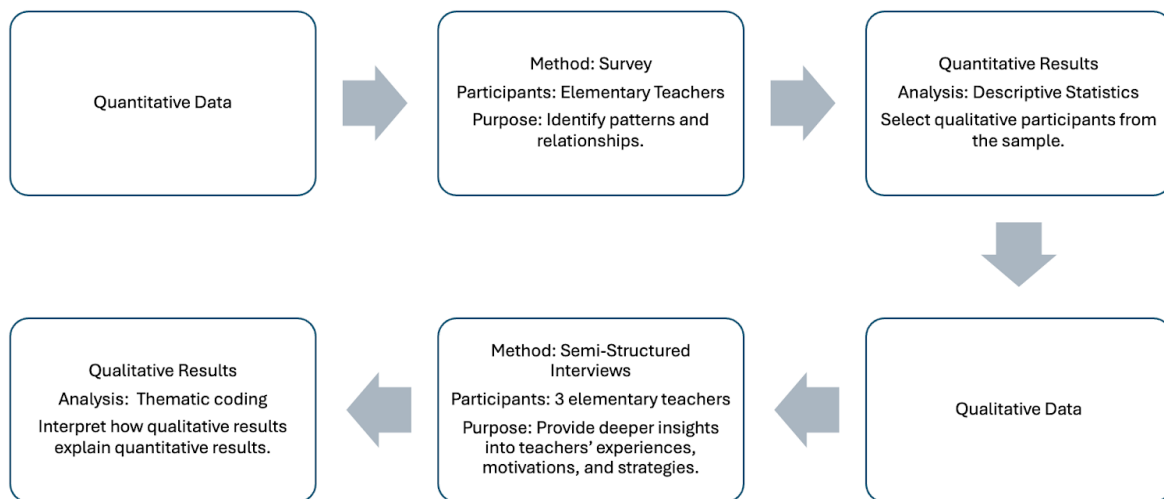
Research Design and Methodological Approach

The purpose of this study explored the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior, focusing on the teacher's perspective. To address the research questions comprehensively, this study followed an explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach employed quantitative and qualitative methods in a sequential manner, allowing for an insightful understanding of the relationship dynamics and their implications for classroom behavior (see Figure 3.1). Creswell (2015) defines, "The intent of the explanatory sequential design is to study a problem by beginning with a quantitative strand to both collect and analyze data, and then to conduct qualitative research to explain the quantitative results" (p. 37-38). The strength of this design lies in the fact that the two phases build upon each other so that there are distinct, easily recognized stages of conducting the design (p. 38). For this study, the quantitative component examined the patterns, perspective, and dynamics of teacher-student relationships using survey data, while the subsequent qualitative component provided deeper insights into elementary teachers' experiences, motivations, and strategies through semi-structured interviews.

By using these methodologies, the study provided both comprehensive coverage and thorough exploration in addressing the research objectives. Quantitative research alone does not adequately investigate personal stories and meanings or deeply probe the perspectives of individuals, while qualitative research alone does not enable generalization from a small group to

a larger population (Creswell, 2015). The mixed-methods approach offered a more complete and integrated view, as using either quantitative or qualitative methods alone would be insufficient for gaining a full understanding of the problem. The strength of this research design lies in the way the two phases build upon one another, combining breadth and depth to enhance the study's explanatory power (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research enabled the study to obtain two complementary perspectives: one drawn from the close-ended response data collected through teacher surveys and the other drawn from the open-ended, personal insights gathered through semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for preliminary exploration with individual teachers to ensure that the quantitative measures are relevant and meaningful to the specific participants being studied. It also enabled the researcher to deepen the quantitative findings by identifying qualitative participants who can provide richer context, elaborating on the personal experiences behind their survey responses. In the context of the study, this mixed-methods approach was especially valuable for capturing not only broad patterns in teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and student behavior but also the nuanced, lived experiences that shape how teachers approach relationship-building in their daily practice (Creswell, 2015).

Figure 3.1 Explanatory Sequential Design



Quantitative Approach

The quantitative phase of this research study focused on collecting and analyzing numerical data that explored patterns, relationships, and general trends in teacher perceptions of positive TSRs and their observed impact on student behavior. This phase provided a broad understanding of the research topic and helped lay the foundation for the qualitative phase of the mixed-methods research design. The quantitative approach focused on different key areas of the overall study purpose. This included examining how elementary teachers perceive the influence of positive TSRs on classroom behavior and surveys assessed teachers' beliefs about how TSRs affect behaviors such as engagement, cooperation, and disruptive incidents. It also explored the extent to which elementary teachers believe that fostering positive relationships reduced instances of disruptive behavior and identified the specific practices teachers already use to

foster positive relationships and evaluated how teachers rate that effectiveness of those practices in promoting positive student behavior.

Overall, the quantitative phase served two key purposes: 1) established patterns in elementary teachers' perceptions of the relationship between TSRs and student behavior, and 2) guided the selection of participants and interview questions for the qualitative phase, ensuring the study addressed areas where deeper insights were needed.

Qualitative Approach

The qualitative phase of this research study explored elementary teachers lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding positive TSRs and their impact on classroom behavior. This phase complemented the quantitative findings by gaining deeper insights into the *how* and *why* behind the observed patterns regarding TSRs. The qualitative approach focused on different key areas of the overall study purpose. This included investigating what drives teachers to prioritize relationship-building with students, as it explored intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. It also identified the difficulties teachers face in cultivating positive relationships and examined how these barriers affect their ability to foster TSRs. Additionally, it explored the specific techniques teachers used to build and maintain TSRs and highlighted how these practices are tailored to different classroom environments or individual students. Lastly, it examined teachers' reflections on how positive TSRs influence student behavior, engagement, and overall classroom dynamics and included narratives about observed changes in student attitudes, cooperation, and emotional well-being.

Overall, the qualitative phase served two key purposes: 1) provided context and depth to the numerical trends identified in the quantitative phase (e.g., the surveys administered show that certain teachers perceive TSRs as highly effective, interview questions revealed the specific facts

or experiences that drove these perceptions), and 2) captured the complexity of teacher-student dynamics, offering real-world examples and personal stories that enhanced the study's practical significance.

Study Context

Setting

This study was conducted across several school districts in the Southern U.S. that examined the dynamics of positive TSRs and their impact on student behavior from the teachers' perspective. This research study focused specifically on the elementary campuses, providing a meaningful context for exploring how teachers in early grade levels perceived and cultivated positive TSRs. With thousands of elementary schools serving students from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade, the setting offered a valuable opportunity to examine relationship-building practices within a diverse student population during the foundational years of learning. Early TSRs are critical, as they lay the groundwork for children's social, emotional, and academic development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Baker, 2006). The elementary years represent a pivotal stage for forming these bonds, which contribute to emotional security, behavioral adjustment, and motivation to learn (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Research suggests that positive relationships established in early childhood can yield long-term benefits, supporting academic achievement, social competence, and resilience, particularly for students considered at risk (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Baker, 2006). By opening the study to all elementary schools in the state, this research sought to generate insights into how elementary teachers build and sustain meaningful connections with students, navigate relational challenges, and implement strategies that support positive classroom climates.

Participants and Sampling

This study focused on recruiting participants who were elementary-level teachers (pre-kindergarten through fifth grade). For the quantitative phase, a survey was available to elementary teachers across a state in the Southern US through a participant recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) posted on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and sent to state-level teacher organizations, allowing for a broad and diverse sample that examined elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. The flyer had specific criteria that participants needed to meet to participate in the research study. The participant needed to be a teacher within in the Southern U.S. and needed to teach PreK-5th grade. There was a total of 40 participants who responded to the survey and signed the informed consent form at the beginning of the survey (Appendix A). Only 14 participants finished the survey in its entirety making the sample size 14 ($n=14$). Table 3.1 offers a breakdown of the participant demographics. Among the participants who completed the survey, the teaching assignments spanned multiple elementary grade levels. Eight participants taught fourth grade, followed by five who taught fifth grade, three who taught first grade, two who taught prekindergarten, two who taught third grade, one who taught kindergarten, and one who taught second grade. It should be noted that one participant identified as an art teacher and selected all grade levels on the survey when asked what grade levels they currently taught. Regarding gender, ten participants identified as female and four as male. Participants represented a range of age groups, with two teachers in the 20-29 age range, three in the 30-39 range, six in the 40-49 range, and one participant who was 60 or older. In terms of race and ethnicity, seven participants identified as White and seven as Hispanic. Teaching experience also varied across the sample of participants. Two reported 0-4 years of teaching experience, five reported 5-9 years, three

reported 10-14 years, three reported 15-19 years, and one participant reported 20 or more years of experience.

Table 3.1- Survey Participant Demographics

Variable	Number of Participants
<i>Grade Level Taught</i>	
<i>Prekindergarten</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Kindergarten</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>1st Grade</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>2nd Grade</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>3rd Grade</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>4th Grade</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>5th Grade</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Gender</i>	
<i>Female</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Age Range of Educator</i>	
<i>20-29 Years Old</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>30-39 Years Old</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>40-49 Years Old</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>50-59 Years Old</i>	<i>0</i>
<i>60+ Years Old</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	
<i>White</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Years of Experience</i>	
<i>0-4 years</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>5-9 years</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>10-14 years</i>	<i>3</i>

<i>15-19 years</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>20+ years</i>	<i>1</i>

For the qualitative phase, three elementary teachers were purposely selected from among the participants who completed the quantitative survey (see Table 3.2). Participants had the opportunity to volunteer to further participate in the study. They were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, providing deeper insights into the motivations, strategies, and challenges associated with building TSRs at the elementary level.

Table 3.2- Interview Participants

Teacher Name	Gender/Race	Grade Level	Years of Experience
Monica Geller	White Female	4th & 5th Grade	12 years
Phoebe Buffay	White Female	Art Teacher: PreK-5th Grade	13 years
Chandler Bing	White Male	4th Grade	3 years

This study employed purposeful sampling for the qualitative phase of the mixed-methods research design. Purposeful sampling involves the intentional selection of individuals who can provide rich, relevant insights into the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2015), in this case, how positive TSRs influence classroom behavior. To ensure alignment between the two phases, participants for the qualitative follow-up were drawn from the pool of elementary teachers who completed the quantitative survey through a commonly used technique in explanatory sequential designs where survey participants volunteered for follow-up interviews during the initial data collection process. This approach supported a smooth transition between phases and strengthened the overall integration of the mixed-methods design.

Data Sources & Collection Methods

This section describes the specific data sources and collection methods used in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study. By combining survey data with in-depth interviews, the study captured a comprehensive understanding of how elementary teachers perceive and navigate the development of positive teacher-student relationships and their impact on student behavior. First, the section outlines the quantitative data source, an online survey administered to elementary teachers and details the procedures for collecting this survey data. It then describes the qualitative data sources, including semi-structured interviews with selected teachers, providing context and depth that explained the quantitative findings. Together, these data sources ensure that the research gathered both breadth and depth in understanding the research questions.

Quantitative Data Sources & Data Collection

The quantitative phase of this study was conducted using a structured survey designed to gather elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. The survey (Table 3.3) consisted of six main sections: (1) perceptions of TSR impact on student behavior, (2) importance of relationship-building strategies, (3) frequency of strategy use, (4) motivations for building relationships, (5) challenges and barriers to relationship-building, and (6) teacher demographics. Teachers responded to a combination of Likert-scale items measuring agreement, importance, and frequency, designed to capture patterns in their beliefs, practices, and challenges related to TSRs.

This study utilized an adapted teacher perception survey informed by the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Pianta (1992), which measures the quality of teacher-student relationships. Items were modified to reflect teachers' overall perceptions of

relationships across their classrooms rather than with a single student. For example, an item from the original STRS (see Appendix C) asked teachers to respond about an individual student, such as, “I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.” For the purposes of this study, this item was modified to reflect teachers’ broader perceptions of relationships across their classrooms rather than focusing on one specific student. The adapted survey (see Appendix D) item was revised to read, “Positive teacher-student relationships improve the overall classroom environment.” This adaptation maintained the relational construct measured in the STRS, which was warmth/connectedness, while aligning the item with the study’s focus on overall classroom relationships and their perceived impact on student behavior.

Additional items were created that examined relationship-building strategies, motivations, frequency of practices, and perceived barriers, allowing the instrument to align with the study’s focus on teacher-student relationships and student behavior. The modifications and additional items were also reviewed by five content area experts and feedback was integrated.

Table 3.3- Teacher Survey on Student Relationships and Behavior

Section	Items
Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher Student Relationships Impact on Student Behavior	(Scale: Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree) 1. Positive teacher-student relationships reduce disruptive behavior in my classroom. 2. When I have a good relationship with a student, they are more engaged in lessons. 3. Positive TSRs improve the overall classroom environment. 4. Building strong relationships with students increases their motivation to follow classroom rules. 5. Positive TSRs help reduce behavioral problems over time.
Section 2: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies	(Scale: Not important / Slightly important / Moderately important / Very important / Extremely important) 1. Showing empathy toward students is important for managing behavior. 2. Providing consistent communication with students helps maintain positive behavior. 3. Offering verbal encouragement increases student motivation. 4. Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests improves engagement. 5. Being fair and respectful builds student trust and reduces behavior problems.
Section 3: Frequency of Use of Strategies	(Scale: Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Always) 1. I check in on students' well-being during the school day. 2. I use praise to reinforce positive behavior. 3. I involve students in classroom decision-making. 4. I adapt lesson plans based on student interests or cultural backgrounds. 5. I make an effort to repair relationships after conflict with a student.

Section	Items
Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships	(Scale: Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree) 1. I build relationships with students because I care about their long-term success. 2. I build relationships because my school expects me to maintain classroom order. 3. My personal teaching philosophy prioritizes strong relationships with students. 4. Building positive TSRs helps meet school behavior expectations. 5. My motivation to build TSRs comes from seeing how it improves the classroom climate.
Section 5: Challenges and Barriers	(Scale: Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly agree) 1. Large class sizes make it difficult to build strong relationships with all students. 2. Time constraints limit my ability to focus on relationship-building. 3. I feel supported by my school to develop strong TSRs. 4. I need more training in how to build and maintain TSRs effectively. 5. Systemic or schoolwide pressures (like testing) reduce the time I can spend on relationship-building.
Section 6: Teacher Demographics	1. What is your gender? (multiple choice) 2. What is your age range? (20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60+) 3. What is your race/ethnicity? (Open-ended) 4. How many years of teaching experience do you have? (0–4, 5–9, 10–14, 15–19, 20+) 5. What grade level(s) do you currently teach? (PK, K, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)

Prior to distributing the survey to participants, the survey instrument was piloted with a small group of elementary teachers outside the study sample to assess clarity, relevance, and the appropriateness of the questions. Feedback from this pilot group was used to make minor adjustments to question wording or survey flow to ensure the instrument effectively captured the intended constructs. For example, original wording to Section 1 included the acronym TSR and

the feedback from the pilot group suggested TSR be spelled out to say teacher-student relationships as to not confuse any participants taking the survey.

The final survey was distributed electronically using Qualtrics, a secure online platform. A cover letter accompanied the survey invitation, explaining the purpose of the study, asking for consent (Appendix A), and emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation. After consent was obtained, the survey asked for name and work email only if the participant volunteered to participate in the follow-up interview. The data collection window lasted one month.

Survey responses were collected and stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and the principal investigator. Information reported in the findings utilized pseudonyms that protected the identity of the participants. The quantitative data provided statistical insights into how teachers perceive TSRs, how frequently they use specific relational strategies, and how these perceptions and practices related to observed student behavior across diverse classroom settings. The findings from the quantitative phase directly informed the qualitative phase by identifying participants for follow-up interviews and areas for deeper exploration.

Qualitative Data Sources & Data Collection

The qualitative component of this study used one primary data source: semi-structured interviews (see Table 3.4). This method was designed to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, motivations, and strategies related to building positive TSRs and their perceived impact on student behavior and classroom management.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of elementary teachers who participated in the quantitative survey. With semi-structured interviews, a mix of questions, prompts, and topics informed the aimed research study but there were open

opportunities to follow hunches and intuitive directions (Bloomberg, 2023). These participants were selected to ensure diverse perspectives across grade levels, years of experience, and backgrounds. The study conducted one round of semi-structured interviews with three elementary teachers. Monica Geller is a female teacher with 12 years of teaching experience and currently teaches 4th and 5th grade students. Phoebe Buffay is a female teacher with 13 years of teaching experience and is currently an art teacher for PreK-5th grade students. Chandler Bing is a male teacher with 3 years of experience and is currently a 4th grade teacher. The interview protocol covered topics including teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for relationship-building, the perceived behavioral and classroom management outcomes of their relational efforts, the challenges and tensions they encounter, and the strategies they use to foster trust, communication, and engagement with students (see Table 3.4). Open-ended questions allowed participants to share personal experiences and reflect on how relational dynamics shape their practice. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and after consent was given, the interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Table 3.4- Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Section	Questions
Section 1: Motivations for Building Relationships	• What motivates you personally to invest time and energy into building relationships with your students? • Can you share an example of a time when you felt your relationship with a student made a meaningful difference in their behavior or learning? • How do your personal values or beliefs shape the way you approach relationship-building in your classroom?
Section 2: Perceived Impact on Behavior and Management	• How do you think positive teacher-student relationships affect student behavior in your classroom? • Have you seen differences in classroom management when you have stronger versus weaker relationships with students? Can you describe what that looks like? • Are there particular strategies you use that you feel help prevent or reduce behavioral issues?

Section	Questions
Section 3: Challenges and Barriers	• What kinds of challenges or barriers do you face when trying to build positive relationships with students? • How do you navigate situations where relationship-building feels especially difficult (for example, with students who are resistant or who have challenging behavior)? • Are there institutional or systemic factors (like time, testing demands, class size) that make it harder to invest in relationships with students?
Section 4: Strategies and Practices	• What specific strategies or practices do you use to build or strengthen relationships with your students? • How do you adjust your strategies for students from different backgrounds, with different needs, or facing different challenges? • Have you participated in any professional development or training related to relationship-building? If so, how has that influenced your practice?
Section 5: Reflection and Advice	• Looking back, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career about building positive teacher-student relationships? • What advice would you give to a new teacher who wants to build strong relationships with their students?

Data Analysis

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design that examined the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior from the perspective of elementary teachers. As such, the data analysis process is divided into two distinct phases: quantitative and qualitative. The first phase involved the analysis of survey data that identified patterns, relationships, and trends in teachers' perceptions of TSRs and their connection to student behavior. The second phase built upon these findings through qualitative analysis of interview transcripts that provided deeper insight into the motivations, experiences, and contextual factors that influence relationship-building practices.

Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical techniques that explored generalizable patterns across the sample, while qualitative data was thematically coded that captured the nuances of teachers lived experiences. The integration of both data sets occurred during the interpretation phase, where qualitative findings explained and expanded upon the quantitative results, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how positive TSRs influence student behavior. The following subsections describe the specific procedures used to analyze each type of data.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through teacher surveys were analyzed using descriptive methods that examined teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. Data analysis was conducted through Excel and the data analysis tool found in Qualtrics.

Data Preparation

Prior to analysis, the data was screened for missing responses, outliers, and entry errors or cleaning the data (Daniels & Minot, 2020). This was accomplished using Excel before analyzing the data. Any incomplete or unusable surveys were excluded from analysis. This analysis helped identify trends in how teachers perceive the influence of TSRs on student behavior. Findings from the quantitative phase helped inform the selection of participants for the qualitative follow-up and shaped the development of interview questions to further explain observed patterns.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were used to summarize the data and provide a foundational understanding of prevailing perceptions and practices among elementary educators. These results are organized and analyzed

in relation to the study’s quantitative research questions, with each set of descriptive findings examined to illustrate how teachers perceive the impact of teacher-student relationships and the importance and use of relationship-building strategies (see Table 3.5). Although inferential statistical analyses were initially planned, the final sample size was not sufficient to support reliable inferential testing.

Table 3.5- Quantitative Research Questions Alignment Table

Research Question and Sub Questions	Data Source
How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on their students’ classroom behavior?	Survey Section 1: Perceptions of TSR Impact on Student Behavior Theme: All Relationships Matter & Student Voice Matters
How do elementary teachers rate the importance of various relationship-building practices in fostering positive behavior?	Survey Section 2 and 3: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies and Frequency of Use of Strategies Theme: Intentional Relational Strategies & Student Voice Matters
To what extent do elementary teachers believe positive teacher-student relationships reduce instances of disruptive behavior in the classroom?	Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior (statement 1- positive TSRs reduce disruptive behavior in my classroom; statement 5- positive TSRs help reduce behavioral problems over time) Theme: All Relationships Matter & Student Voice Matters

Table 3.6- Qualitative Research Questions Alignment Table

Research Question and Sub Questions	Data Source
What motivates elementary teachers to engage in relationship-building practices, and how do they perceive its impact on classroom behavior?	Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships

What challenges and tensions do elementary teachers face when building positive relationships with students, and how do they overcome these barriers and address these challenges?	Section 5: Challenges and Barriers Theme: Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building
How do elementary teachers perceive the impact of their relationship-building efforts of student behavior and classroom management?	Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior (statement 3- positive TSRs improve the overall classroom environment; statement 4- building strong relationships with students increases their motivation to follow classroom rules) Theme: Classroom Management

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative component of this study provided a deeper understanding of the findings from the quantitative phase by exploring the experiences, motivations, and contextual factors that influenced teachers' relationship-building practices. This phase involved the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews of elementary teachers who participated in the survey and volunteered for the follow-up qualitative portion.

Data Preparation

Prior to analysis, all interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. All interviews were conducted virtually, Zoom's built-in transcription was utilized and after was reviewed and corrected for accuracy. Once the interviews were finalized, all transcripts were transferred to Microsoft Excel to be reviewed and to facilitate organization, manual coding, and theme development throughout the analysis process. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the qualitative data, drawing on

Saldaña's (2021) recommendations for coding and theme development in qualitative research, including first cycle coding, second cycle coding, and identifying themes.

Coding Process

Coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first pass or first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted. The second cycle of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory (Saldaña, 2021).

The analysis started with first cycle coding, using an inductive approach that allowed categories and patterns to emerge from the data organically. Following an initial read-through the values expressed by participants were identified and labeled using descriptive phrases aligned with the study's research questions. This process utilized value coding, which applied codes that reflected participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives or worldviews and descriptive coding where it helped take participants' responses and summarizes in a word or short phrase (Saldaña, 2021). These were appropriate for this study as it explored teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and their connections to classroom behavior. For example, when asked to share a strategy used in the classroom to help with classroom behavior, a participant explained the behavior improvement plans she implements with individual students. She went on to explain how she builds trust with not only the student but the parents as well, showing she values *relationships* and *trust* when creating behavior improvement plans (see Table 3.7).

A second read through of the data, with the goal of developing a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the array of first cycle codes, was conducted to examine patterns (Saldaña, 2021). Emerging patterns were analyzed related to the

study's research questions and grouped into broader categories through pattern coding, used to reorganize and condense large amounts of the initial data into more meaningful units of analysis by identifying explanatory or inferential patterns (Saldaña, 2021). For example, after reading through the participant's response to the development of the behavior improvement plan, she continued to explain the importance of having daily communication with the parents to ensure the plan gets implemented with fidelity. This helped produce the pattern code of communication and parent relationships (see Table 3.7).

Theme Development

After completing both cycles of coding, a final read through of the interview transcripts was conducted to examine any recurring patterns that were identified across participants. Patterns that appeared most frequently were used to develop categories, which ultimately informed the five overarching themes identified through the coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and external distinction, with a focus on how they explained teacher motivations, relationship-building practices, and the perceived influence of TSRs on classroom behavior. For example, after reading through the participant's responses, not only did they emphasize the importance of building relationships with their students, but they mentioned needing to have similar relationships with parents and colleagues to help build foundations for their classrooms which in turn created the theme of *All Relationships Matter* (see Table 3.7). These themes served as the foundation for presenting and interpreting the qualitative findings in the results and discussion chapters.

Table 3.7- Example of the coding process that led to categories making up the theme of All Relationships Matter

First Round Coding- Value & Descriptive Coding	Second Round Coding- Pattern Coding	Category	Category Description
Behavior improvement plan; values trust; positive reinforcement; daily communication with parents; reward system with behavior improvement plan	Parent relationship; Trust; Communication	Parent Relationships	Mrs. Hardwick shares an example of a strategy she uses with students who exhibit challenging behaviors. She puts those students on a behavior improvement plan and goes on to explain that not only is student buy-in and student choice important in creating this plan, but it's also important to have daily communication with parents and parent input. She later expresses that parent relationships are just as important to build as student relationships.
Works well with parent input Parent communication	Parent relationships		
Values positive relationships and respect; values building rapport	Respect; Rapport; Relationships	Student Relationships	Mrs. Hardwick shares her preferred method to a successful classroom management strategy, building student relationships. She references the TED talk <i>"Every Kid Needs a Champion"</i> by Rita Pierson and goes on to explain that she would rather build rapport with her students and have strong relationships. As a teacher who has taught for 13 years, she mentions that she has personally experienced what it's like to have a positive relationship with a student versus no relationship or a negative one and how that affects her classroom.
More benefits in relationship building; have tried other systems	Prefers relationship building		
Values positive relationships and respect; values building rapport	Relationships		
Values collaboration	Colleague collaboration	Collaboration	Mrs. Hardwick shares that when building relationships with students, she also leans on the relationships she has with her colleagues. She has team teachers she shares students with and she explains that in order to have strong relationships and strong foundations, then you collaborate with your colleagues and use the same strategies across all classroom periods. She even shares an example where she had a challenging student where she had trouble connecting with and she leaned on not only her team teachers, but also the school counselor, school psychologist, and campus administrators, asking for additional support.
Extreme challenging behavior; values collaboration	Colleague/Admin collaboration		

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, in which the integration of quantitative and qualitative data was central to addressing the overarching research question holistically. The integration occurred in two primary phases: at the connecting stage during data collection and at the interpreting state during data analysis and interpretation.

Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative Phases

Integration between the quantitative and qualitative phases of this explanatory sequential mixed methods study occurred primarily through the selection of interview participants based on survey results. Teachers who completed the survey were invited to volunteer for follow-up qualitative participation, ensuring that the qualitative sample was nested within the quantitative population. This sampling strategy supported methodological coherence and allowed for meaningful connections between data strands. Teachers with varied responses on key survey items, such as those rating the impact of TSRs on behavior particularly high or low, were purposefully selected to provide richer context and deeper explanation of quantitative trends. This approach aligned with Bloomberg's (2023) emphasis on connecting data sources and maintaining congruence across mixed methods components that supported analytical rigor and interpretation.

Interpreting and Merging Data

After the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately, integration occurred through a side-by-side comparison of findings. In the findings chapter, quantitative survey results are presented first to highlight overall trends in teachers' perceptions of TSRs and their reported influence on student behavior. These findings are followed by qualitative themes derived from

interviews, offering explanatory insights and contextual depth. For example, if survey responses suggest that TSRs reduce disruptive behavior, qualitative data may reveal the specific strategies teachers use or the challenges they face in achieving these outcomes.

In the discussion chapter, a joint display matrix (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was used to visually align quantitative results with supporting qualitative evidence, such as teacher quotes. This technique helped identify areas of convergence, divergence, and expansion between the two datasets. Convergent findings reinforced the strength of the study's conclusions, while divergent results pointed to important contextual or systemic nuances that surveys alone cannot capture. Ultimately, this integration strategy enhanced the richness and validity of the study by combining the breadth of quantitative analysis with the depth of qualitative inquiry. This approach is consistent with the core purpose of mixed methods research, which sought to draw on strengths of both data strands that developed a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Bloomberg 2023).

Reliability and Validity - Quantitative Data

To ensure the accuracy, consistency, and integrity of the quantitative findings, this study employed multiple strategies that established both the reliability and validity of the survey instruments and data analysis procedures.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each of the primary survey constructs, including perceived behavioral impact and the importance of relationship-building strategies. Cronbach's alpha is a widely accepted statistical method for evaluating the degree to which items on a scale measure the same underlying construct. Cronbach's alpha was calculated in Microsoft Excel, using the standard formula

$$\alpha = \frac{k}{k-1} \left(1 - \frac{\sum \sigma_i^2}{\sigma_T^2} \right)$$
 where k represents the number of items in the scale ($k=25$), $\sum \sigma_i^2$ is the sum of the variances of each individual item ($\sum \sigma_i^2=19.49157509$), and σ_T^2 is the variance of the total scale scores ($\sigma_T^2=86.25$). The formula yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.81$, indicating good internal consistency among the survey items. Generally, $0.80 > \alpha \geq 0.70$ is considered acceptable for research (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This result indicated that the survey items functioned cohesively to measure a consistent underlying construct related to teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and student behavior. This reliability check was essential given that some of the survey items were adapted from validated instruments and modified for the current context. Calculating alpha values ensured that these scales continued to perform reliably within the population being studied.

Several strategies were employed to support the validity of the quantitative data. First, content validity was addressed through the careful adaptation of existing instruments, such as items derived from Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Pianta (1992) which have been widely used in prior research (Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). These items were reviewed for alignment with the study's research questions and constructs to ensure they adequately reflected the intended domains of TSRs and behavioral perceptions. Second, construct validity was strengthened through the use of clearly defined constructs, consistent Likert-type response scales, and internal reliability testing that verified that each construct was measured consistently. In addition, face validity was formally evaluated through feedback during instrument development, with practicing educators reviewing survey items for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the elementary classroom context. Together, these measures ensured that

the quantitative findings are both trustworthy and meaningful, laying a foundation for interpreting patterns across the larger sample and informing the qualitative phase of the study.

Consistency and Trustworthiness - Qualitative Data

To ensure the trustworthiness, rigor, and consistency of the qualitative component of this study, multiple validation strategies were employed throughout data collection and analysis. Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings (Bloomberg, 2023). These criteria helped ensure that the interpretations genuinely reflected participants' experiences and were not unduly influenced by researcher bias or procedural inconsistencies.

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data and triangulation of sources. Data collected from semi-structured interviews allowed for cross-validation of reported practices and real-time relational interactions. Triangulation enhanced credibility by confirming findings across multiple forms of evidence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Dependability was addressed through the maintenance of an audit trail that documented all analytic decisions, code development, and theme refinement. This audit trail included analytic memos that captured the researcher's evolving reflections and interpretations during the coding process. As Saldaña (2021) notes, analytic memo writing is a vital component of trustworthy qualitative analysis, providing transparency into the researcher's thinking and supporting the consistency of interpretations over time. As such, analytic memos were recorded in a journal maintained by the researcher that captured ongoing reflections, insights, and decision-making after read throughs and coding sessions of the data.

Confirmability was strengthened through peer debriefing, in which a colleague familiar with qualitative methods reviews portions of the data, coding, and emerging themes and provided feedback and checked for researcher bias. Additionally, the use of verbatim quotes and rich description anchored interpretations in participants' own words, minimizing over-interpretation and enhancing the objectivity of the findings.

Transferability was supported through the inclusion of thick, contextual descriptions of participants, school environments, and teachers' narrated experiences with relationship-building and classroom behavior, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational contexts. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable due to the study's small sample size, instead, the results provide insight into participating teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Finally, member checking was used during the interpretation phase. Participants were invited to review preliminary findings or summaries that confirmed that the interpretations resonate with their lived experiences and perspectives. This process provided an additional safeguard against misrepresentation and ensured the authenticity of reported themes.

By employing these strategies, the study established a foundation of trustworthiness and consistency across the qualitative phase, supporting the integration of findings with the quantitative strand and enhancing the overall validity of the mixed methods design.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology used to explore teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior, including the mixed methods research design, study setting, participant selection, data collection instruments, and data analysis procedures. By integrating both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews, this study provided a more

comprehensive understanding of how teachers build and experience TSRs in elementary classrooms, and how these relationships influence student behavior. The use of an explanatory sequential design allowed for initial broad insights to be further explored and contextualized through rich, narrative data. The next chapter presents the results of the data collected, beginning with the quantitative findings, followed by the qualitative themes that were identified.

Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examining elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) on student behavior. The purpose of this chapter is to report the results from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study.

The chapter is organized to reflect the sequential nature of the research design. First, results from the quantitative survey are presented through descriptive statistics which identified overall patterns in teachers' perceptions of TSRs, the perceived importance and the use of relationship-building strategies. These findings provided a broad overview of trends across the small teacher sample and helped inform the selection and focus of the qualitative phase. Next, findings from the qualitative phase are presented, drawing on the data collected through semi-structured interviews. This phase offered an in-depth exploration of teachers' motivations, experiences, and perceived challenges related to relationship-building and classroom behavior. The qualitative findings are organized thematically to highlight common patterns and variations across participants that helped explain the quantitative results.

Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of how elementary teachers perceive the role of positive TSRs in shaping student behavior. By integrating statistical trends with teachers lived experiences, this chapter lays the foundation for interpretation and discussion of the study's implications, which are addressed in Chapter 5.

Quantitative Findings

This section presents the findings from the quantitative phase of the study, which explored patterns, relationships, and general trends in teacher perceptions of positive TSRs and

their observed impact on student behavior. Data was collected using an online survey, the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)* developed by Pianta (1992) and administered through the Qualtrics platform. The survey included Likert-scale items assessing: (1) perceptions of TSR impact on student behavior, (2) importance of relationship-building strategies, (3) frequency of strategy use, (4) motivations for building relationships, and (5) challenges and barriers to relationship-building. To maximize participation and reach a diverse sample of elementary educators, the survey link was distributed through professional teacher organizations and shared via social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok). Participation was voluntary and all responses were collected anonymously. The following sub-sections present quantitative findings through descriptive statistics and survey results for each of the five survey sections.

Survey Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior

Items addressing *Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior* explored perceptions of how relationships influence student engagement, motivation, behavioral regulation, and overall classroom climate (Table 4.1). Participants indicated their level of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with statements related to student engagement during lessons, reductions in disruptive behavior, increased motivation to follow classroom rules, long-term behavioral improvement, and improvements in the overall classroom environment. Overall, teachers overwhelmingly agreed that positive TSRs have a meaningful impact on student behavior and classroom functioning. Participants consistently reported that building relationships increase student engagement, reduce disruptive behavior, improve motivation to follow classroom rules, and help decrease behavioral problems over time. Notably,

all participants agreed that positive TSRs contribute to a more positive overall classroom environment.

Table 4.1 presents the descriptive statistics summarizing elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on classroom behavior. Overall, teachers reported agreement across all five items, indicating a consistent belief that positive relationships play a meaningful role in shaping classroom behavior and climate. There was strong agreement that positive teacher-student relationships improve the overall classroom environment with a mean of 4.93 and standard deviation of 0.27 ($M=4.93$, $SD=0.27$), with responses showing little variability, suggesting a high level of consensus among participants. Similarly, participants agreed that positive relationships reduce disruptive behavior ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.65$) and increase students' motivation to follow classroom rules ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.65$). There was also strong agreement among participants that having a good relationship with students increases engagement during lessons ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.63$) and that positive TSRs help reduce behavioral problems over time ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.65$). Median scores of 5 across most survey items further indicated that a majority of respondents selected "strongly agree." Across all survey items, mean scores ranged from 4.36 to 4.93 on a five-point Likert scale, with relatively low standard deviations, suggesting consistently positive perceptions and minimal disagreement among participants. These findings indicated that elementary teachers in this sample perceived positive TSRs as central to student engagement, behavior, and overall classroom climate.

Table 4.1- Descriptive Statistics: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior

<i>Survey Question: When it comes to your perceptions of teacher-student relationships on student behavior, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree.</i>											
Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
Positive teacher-student relationships reduce	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (57.1%)	4.5	5	0.65	3	5

Survey Question: When it comes to your perceptions of teacher-student relationships on student behavior, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree.

Survey Statement	n	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
disruptive behavior in my classroom.											
When I have a good relationship with a student, they are more engaged in lessons.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	7 (50%)	6 (42.9%)	4.36	4	0.63	3	5
Positive teacher-student relationships improve the overall classroom environment.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	13 (92.9%)	4.93	5	0.27	4	5
Building strong relationships with students increases their motivation to follow classroom rules.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (57.1%)	4.5	5	0.65	3	5
Positive teacher-student relationships help reduce behavioral problems over time.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (57.1%)	4.5	5	0.65	3	5

Note: Survey statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Survey Section 2: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies

Items addressing *Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies* evaluated the importance of specific relational strategies using a Likert-scale ranging from not important to extremely important. These strategies included incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests, demonstrating empathy towards students, offering verbal encouragement, maintaining fairness and respect, and providing consistent communication. Overall, teachers rated relationship-building strategies as highly important for fostering positive student behavior. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of being fair and respectful, maintaining consistent communication, showing empathy, and offering verbal encouragement as key practices for building trust, supporting engagement, and managing behavior. Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests was also viewed as an important strategy for improving student engagement.

Table 4.2 presents the descriptive statistics summarizing teachers' ratings of the importance of different relationship-building strategies. Overall, teachers rated all strategies as highly important, with mean scores ranging from 4.29 to 4.71 on a five-point Likert scale. Providing consistent communication with students had the highest mean rating of 4.71 and standard deviation of 0.61 ($M=4.71$, $SD=0.61$), indicating agreement among the participants regarding its importance for maintaining positive behavior. Being fair and respectful was also rated highly ($M=4.57$, $SD=0.65$), reflecting the participants' belief that trust and respect play a big role in reducing behavior problems. Showing empathy toward students ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.73$), offering verbal encouragement ($M=4.43$, $SD=0.94$), and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests into instruction ($M=4.29$, $SD=0.99$) were similarly rated as important strategies. Although these survey items demonstrated a slightly greater variability in responses, all medians were near the highest scale point, suggesting broad agreement among teachers on the importance of relational practices in supporting student engagement and behavior.

Table 4.2- Descriptive Statistics: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies

<i>Survey Question: When it comes to relationship-building strategies, how do you rate the importance of each strategy?</i>											
Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Extremely Important	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
Showing empathy toward students is important for managing behavior.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (14.3%)	6 (42.9%)	6 (42.9%)	4.28	4	0.72	3	5
Providing consistent communication with students helps maintain positive behavior.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	11 (78.6%)	4.71	5	0.61	3	5
Offering verbal encouragement increases student motivation.	14	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	9 (64.3%)	4.42	5	0.93	2	5
Incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests improves engagement.	14	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	3 (21.4%)	8 (57.1%)	4.28	5	0.99	2	5
Being fair and respectful builds	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (28.6%)	9 (64.3%)	4.57	5	0.64	3	5

Survey Question: When it comes to relationship-building strategies, how do you rate the importance of each strategy?

Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Not Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Extremely Important	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
student trust and reduces behavior problems.											

Note: Survey statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=not important to 5=extremely important.

Survey Section 3: Frequency of Use of Strategies

Items addressing *Frequency of Use of Strategies* assessed how elementary teachers valued relationship-building practices in fostering positive behavior using a Likert scale ranging from never to always. They were asked how frequently they used specific relational strategies in their classrooms. Overall, the majority of participants reported frequent use of relationship-building strategies in their classrooms. Most teachers indicated that they often or always involved students in classroom decision-making, checked in on students' well-being during the school, used praise to reinforce positive behavior, and made intentional efforts to repair relationships after conflict. In contrast, adapting lesson plans based on students' interests or cultural backgrounds occurred less consistently, with many teachers reporting that they engaged in this practice only sometimes.

Table 4.3 presents the descriptive statistics summarizing the teachers' reported frequency of using relationship-building strategies in their classrooms. Overall, teachers indicated frequent use of all strategies, with mean scores ranging from 3.95 to 4.42 on a five-point scale. Making an effort to repair relationships after conflict was reported as the most frequently used strategy with a mean of 4.42 and a standard deviation of 0.63 ($M=4.42$, $SD=0.63$), followed by the use of praise to reinforce positive behavior ($M=4.36$, $SD=0.65$). These findings suggest that teachers prioritized relational repair and positive reinforcement as part of their daily practice. Teachers also reported regularly checking in on students' well-being during the school ($M=4.15$, $SD=0.62$)

and involving students in classroom decision-making ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.96$). Adapting lesson plans based on student interests or cultural backgrounds was used less frequently ($M=3.95$, $SD=0.91$) and had the greatest variability in responses. Despite the variation, median scores across all survey items suggest that relationship-building strategies are commonly embedded in teachers' instructional and behavioral practices. These findings suggest that while teachers regularly used interpersonal and relational strategies to support student behavior, instructional adaptations related to student interests and culture may be implemented less frequently.

Table 4.3- Descriptive Statistics: Frequency of Use of Strategies

<i>Survey Question: How often do you use these strategies to help build relationships with your students?</i>											
Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
I check in on students' well-being during the school day.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (14.3%)	9 (64.3%)	3 (21.4%)	4.15	4	0.62	3	5
I use praise to reinforce positive behavior.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (57.1%)	4.36	5	0.65	3	5
I involve students in classroom decision-making.	14	0 (0%)	2 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	8 (57.1%)	4 (28.6%)	4.32	4	0.96	2	5
I adapt lesson plans based on student interests or cultural backgrounds.	14	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	8 (57.1%)	4 (28.6%)	1 (7.1%)	3.95	3	0.91	1	5
I make an effort to repair relationships after conflict with a student.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	10 (71.4%)	4.42	5	0.63	3	5
Note: Survey statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=never to 5=always.											

Survey Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships

Items addressing *Motivations for Building Relationships* explored the extent to which various intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivated teachers to build relationships with students. Participants indicated their level of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with statements reflecting personal values, instructional beliefs, and institutional expectations related to relationship-building. Overall, participants reported that their motivation for building relationships with students is driven primarily by intrinsic factors rather than external expectations. Most teachers indicated that caring about students' long-term success, improving

classroom climate, and aligning with their personal teaching philosophy motivated their relationship-building efforts. Additionally, many teachers viewed positive TSRs as an effective way to support classroom behavior expectations. In contrast, teachers expressed more mixed or neutral views about building relationships primarily in response to school expectations for maintaining classroom order.

Table 4.4 presents the descriptive statistics summarizing the teachers' motivations for building relationships with students. Overall, participants expressed strong agreement with motivation statements rooted in personal values and beliefs about student success. Teachers most supported building relationships because they care about students' long-term success with a mean of 4.5 and standard deviation of 0.65 ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.65$) and because their personal teaching philosophy prioritizes building relationships ($M=4.57$, $SD=0.65$). These findings suggest that intrinsic motivations play a central role in this sample of teachers' relational practices. Participants also agreed that building positive TSRs supports school behavior expectations ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.85$) and improves the overall classroom climate ($M=4$, $SD=1.24$), indicating teachers recognized both instructional and behavioral benefits of relational work. However, the survey item related to external expectations, building relationships because the school expects teachers to maintain classroom order, received the lowest mean rating ($M=3.36$, $SD=1.28$) and demonstrated the greatest variability in responses. This suggests that while institutional expectations may influence some teachers, they are less consistently cited as a primary motivation compared to personal beliefs and observed classroom outcomes. Collectively, these findings indicated that elementary teachers, from the sample, are primarily motivated to build relationships with students due to intrinsic values, professional philosophy,

and perceived positive impacts on classroom climate and student behavior, rather than external factors motivating their efforts.

Table 4.4- Descriptive Statistics: Motivations for Building Relationships

Survey Question: When it comes to your motivations for building relationships with students, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree.

Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
I build relationships with students because I care about their long-term success.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	8 (57.1%)	4.5	5	0.65	3	5
I build relationships because my school expects me to maintain classroom order.	14	2 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	6 (42.9%)	3 (21.4%)	3 (21.4%)	3.36	3	1.28	1	5
My personal teaching philosophy prioritizes strong relationships with students.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	4 (28.6%)	9 (64.3%)	4.57	5	0.65	3	5
Building positive teacher-student relationships helps meet school behavior expectations.	14	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0%)	4 (28.6%)	9 (64.3%)	4.5	5	0.85	2	5
My motivation to build teacher-student relationships comes from seeing how it improves the classroom climate.	14	1 (7.1%)	1 (7.1%)	1 (7.1%)	5 (35.7%)	6 (42.9%)	4	4	1.24	1	5

Note: Survey statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Survey Section 5: Challenges & Barriers

Items addressing *Challenges and Barriers* explored the challenges and barriers teachers encountered when building positive TSRs. Participants indicated their level of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with statements addressing structural, institutional, and professional factors such as class size, time constraints, school support, training needs, and systemic pressures related to accountability and testing. Overall, teachers identified structural and systemic factors as the most significant barriers to building TSRs. Many participants indicated that large class sizes and broader school-wide pressures, such as testing demands, limit the time and opportunities available for relationship-building. Time constraints were also noted as a challenge, though to a lesser extent. In contrast, fewer teachers reported a

need for additional training in relationship-building. Notably, most participants reported feeling supported by their school in developing positive TSRs.

Table 4.5 presents the descriptive statistics summarizing teachers perceived challenges and barriers to building positive TSRs. Overall, participants reported moderate to high agreement with several structural and contextual barriers that limited their ability to engage in relationship-building. Large class sizes presented as a prominent challenge, with teachers generally agreeing that class size made it difficult to build relationships with all students with a mean of 4.14 and standard deviation of 0.66 ($M=4.14$, $SD=0.66$). Participants also reported that systemic or school-wide pressures, such as testing, reduced the time they spent on relationship-building ($M=3.5$, $SD=1.34$). Responses to time constraints showed greater variability ($M=3.29$, $SD=1.2$), suggesting that while time limitations are a barrier for many teachers, the extent of this challenge varied across participants. Despite these constraints, teachers largely agreed that they feel supported by their school in developing positive TSRs ($M=4.43$, $SD=0.65$), indicating a generally favorable perception of institutional support, at least among this sample. However, participants tended to disagree with the statement that they need more training to build and maintain TSRs ($M=2.38$, $SD=1.56$), though responses to this survey item showed the highest variability. This suggests differing perceptions among teachers regarding the professional development related to relationship-building. Overall, these findings suggest that while teachers perceive institutional support and feel confident in their relational skills, structural factors such as class size, time constraints, and systemic pressures remain significant barriers to consistently building and sustaining positive TSRs.

Table 4.5- Descriptive Statistics: Challenges & Barriers

Survey Question: When it comes to the challenges and barriers you face as you build relationships with your students, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree.

Survey Statement	<i>n</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Med	SD	Min	Max
Large class sizes makes it difficult to build strong relationships with all students.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (14.3%)	8 (57.1%)	4 (28.6%)	4.14	4	0.66	3	5
Time constraints limit my ability to focus on relationship-building.	14	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	6 (42.9%)	2 (14.3%)	3 (21.4%)	3.29	3	1.20	1	5
I feel supported by my school to develop strong teacher-student relationships.	14	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.1%)	6 (42.9%)	7 (50%)	4.43	4.5	0.65	3	5
I need more training in how to build and maintain teacher-student relationships effectively.	14	6 (42.9%)	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	1 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)	2.38	2	1.56	1	5
Systemic or school-wide pressures (like testing) reduce the time I can spend on relationship-building.	14	1 (7.1%)	3 (21.4%)	2 (14.3%)	4 (28.6%)	4 (28.6%)	3.5	4	1.34	1	5

Note: Survey statements measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Qualitative Findings

This section presents the findings from the qualitative phase of the study, which explored elementary teachers lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding positive TSRs and their impact on classroom behavior. Three elementary teachers participated in the interview phase of the study. Monica Geller is a white female with 12 years of teaching experience currently teaching 4th & 5th grade. Phoebe Buffay is a white female with 13 years of teaching experience currently teaching Art to all grade levels (PreK-5th grade). And lastly, Chandler Bing is a white male with 3 years of teaching experience currently teaching 4th grade. There were five themes that were constructed from the analysis of interviews: (1) All Relationships Matter, (2) Classroom Management, (3) Intentional Relational Strategies, (4) Student Voice Matters, and (5) Systemic Factors & Barriers (see Table 4.6). Participation was voluntary, teachers had the choice of further participating in the study by agreeing to a follow-up interview. All interviews were

done virtually through Zoom, and all participants gave consent to be recorded. The following sub-sections present qualitative findings for each theme that was constructed followed by the sub-themes that accompany each category and what participants shared on each of their lived experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding positive TSRs and how this impacted behavior in their own classrooms.

Table 4.6- Overview of Thematic Analysis

Theme	Category	Theme Definition
All Relationships Matter	• Parent Relationships • Student Relationships • Collaboration	This refers to teachers shared belief that effective classroom behavior and student success are not shaped solely by the teacher–student relationship, but by a broader relational network that includes families, colleagues, and school staff.
Classroom Management	• Consistency & Follow Through • Structured Routines & Procedures • Classroom Climate	This refers to the intentional practices teachers use to establish and maintain a structured, predictable, and emotionally safe learning environment through consistency, clear routines and procedures, explicit instruction, and ongoing follow-through.
Intentional Relational Strategies	• Authenticity • Relational Integrity: Honesty, Trust, and Respect • Relational Presence	This refers to the purposeful actions teachers take to build and sustain meaningful relationships with students.
Student Voice Matters	• Student Agency and Buy-In • Personal Connections	This refers to teachers’ intentional efforts to honor students’ perspectives, preferences, and lived experiences by offering meaningful opportunities for choice, input, and personal connection.
Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building	• Time Constraints and Lack of Professional Development • Lack of District Support and Guidance • Rising Behavioral Challenges	This refers to the institutional, organizational, and policy-related conditions that limit teachers’ capacity to consistently build and sustain positive teacher–student relationships.

All Relationships Matter

One of the most prominent themes that was identified from the interview data was *All Relationships Matter*, reflecting teachers' consistent emphasis on the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships beyond the classroom teacher-student dyad. Across interviews, participants described how relationships with parents, students, and colleagues collectively influenced student behavior, classroom climate, and teachers' ability to respond effectively to challenges. Teachers viewed parent partnerships as essential for consistency and trust, student relationships as foundational for engagement and behavior improvement, and collaboration with colleagues and administrators as critical for supporting students with complex needs.

All Relationships Matter depicts how teachers described their shared belief that effective classroom behavior and student success are not shaped solely by the teacher-student relationship, but by a broader relational network that includes families, colleagues, and school staff. In understanding this theme, teachers described the following: (1) Parent Relationships, (2) Student Relationships, and (3) Collaboration. Each category describing the theme is unpacked below.

Parent Relationships

Teachers placed an emphasis on building positive, trusting relationships with parents as a means of supporting student behavior and emotional regulation. Participants described parent trust as essential for ensuring that behavioral decisions were understood and supported beyond the classroom. When teachers established positive partnerships with families, behavioral decisions were more likely to be understood, supported, and sustained at home. For example, Phoebe Buffay explained that parent relationships increased transparency and reduced resistance to behavioral interventions, noting:

And even building that relationship with their parents. You know, they trust me more if we have a relationship versus parents that don't know anything about me. You know, they might struggle to trust why I'm giving consequences or things like that.

Her reflection highlights how relational credibility with parents strengthened the legitimacy of classroom management decisions. Similarly, Chandler Bing framed parent communication as a proactive relational practice rather than a reactive disciplinary step. He shared, “But one thing I do is I build that relationship with the parents. One thing, I'm like, hey, I'll make a phone call if I see someone struggling” later reinforcing, “The parent relationship is just as important with the kid.” His comments illustrated how ongoing communication positioned parents as collaborative partners rather than distant stakeholders.

Beyond communication alone, participants also described how parent partnerships directly supported behavior intervention efforts. Monica Geller shared that one of her strategies to help with managing behavior is by creating behavior improvement plans that are tailored to individual student needs. She explained that communication with families allowed behavioral coaching to continue outside the classroom:

It has made a big difference, and so he was really struggling with, you know, using kind words and being nice to others in math, and so being able to tell his parents that they were able to have those conversations with him, and it was one of those things that mom could see it. Before he got to her after school, so she could already be prepared to have that conversation as soon as she saw him at the end of the day. The parents have really appreciated it.

Monica's example demonstrated how relational alignment between home and school created continuity in expectations, allowing behavioral redirection to occur in real time across settings. Additionally, Phoebe reinforced the importance of establishing consistency between home and school. She shared her experience with home visits. She explained that they are a campus requirement, but she finds them to be helpful in her classroom. She stated:

So if there's behavior issues in class. It's always great to do a home visit, you know, so the parent and I, and even the child, can build a stronger relationship, so maybe those behaviors, you know, lesson in the class.

Ultimately, participants' reflections suggested that parent relationships functioned as a relational bridge, connecting classroom practices, behavioral interventions, and students' home environments. Teachers viewed these partnerships as essential for gaining insight into students lived experiences, fostered mutual trust, and creating shared responsibility for behavioral growth. Rather than viewing behavior management as teacher-centered, participants framed it as a collaborative process grounded in family engagement.

Student Relationships

Teachers also placed significant emphasis on the importance of building relationships with their students. Across interviews, participants described teacher-student relationships as foundational to student engagement, behavioral regulation, and emotional responsiveness within the classroom. Teachers viewed relationship-building as a prerequisite for both academic and behavioral success. Monica, for instance, shared her experience of what it is like to have a positive relationship with a student vs. a negative one or no relationship and how that affected engagement in the classroom. She stated:

I have personally experienced what it's like to have a positive relationship with a student versus no relationship or a negative relationship. And the difference that that makes in their engagement in class and just their connections with their peers and with other adults in the building.

Her reflection underscored how relational closeness extends beyond compliance, influencing students' broader social integration within the school environment. She further illustrated how these connections translated into observable behavioral shifts:

... and I've seen the benefits of that, where those students, once they've got that connection with me, they will try harder, and they will work harder, and they encourage those around them to, like, hey, you know, she said, you know, pay attention, or, you know, stop talking, or we should be doing this.

Here, Monica highlighted how relational trust not only increased individual effort but also fostered peer accountability, suggesting that relational influence could diffuse across the classroom climate. Similarly, Phoebe described how building relationships with her students has shaped behavioral support, noting, “and then, progressively, I'm noticing their behavior get better. A little quicker than other kids that I don't have that relationship with, or I haven't put in that time yet with.” Her observation positioned relationships as a catalyst for behavioral change, suggesting that trust and rapport may shorten the timeline for improvement.

In contrast, Chandler shared his experience where lack of relationships made behavior management more challenging. He described one particularly resistant student:

Yeah, so that's a challenge, because he literally has... I don't think... he has the mental capacity for me to reach him when I'm trying to build, like, he's just, like... everything's ha-ha, jokey, or like, I'm gonna be rude to the teacher, and I think he thinks it's funny, but even the other students are like, that's not cool.

Chandler's account highlighted the limits of relational work in cases where students resist connection, while also showing how peer norms sometimes reinforced behavioral expectations when teacher relationships had not yet been established. Collectively, teachers' reflections suggested that positive teacher-student relationships fostered trust, increased student effort, strengthened peer dynamics, and supported behavioral growth over time. Conversely, the absence of these relationships often complicated classroom management. Across participants, relationships were not viewed as an additional strategy, but rather as the relational foundation upon which effective behavior support was built.

Collaboration

Lastly, teachers described collaboration as an essential component of building and sustaining positive TSRs, particularly when addressing persistent behavioral challenges.

Monica emphasized that supporting students required shared responsibility across the instructional team, she noted that it is a “team effort” when discussing her behavior improvement plans. Rather than viewing relationship-building as an individual responsibility, participants emphasized the importance of shared efforts among teachers, administrators, and support staff even when you may not get the desired end result. Monica shared a challenge she faced when building a relationship with a particular student and needed to lean on her team:

I tried everything I could think of, I mean, I was reaching out to administrators, behavioral specialists. I mean, I was trying everything I could think of to try to reach this particular student, and nothing was successful. You really have to find or try everything possible, and sometimes that means asking others to step in and help with those relationships and those connections.

Here, Monica emphasized that relationship-building is not always achievable through individual teacher effort alone and often requires collaborative intervention. It also highlights that even highly intentional relational strategies may not be sufficient.

Teachers also highlighted how collaboration contributed to a more positive and supportive school climate. Chandler described working within a cohesive team as “a breath of fresh air,” emphasizing how collegial relationships fostered shared responsibility, open communication, and collective problem-solving when addressing student needs. This sense of teamwork not only supported individual teachers but also reinforced a campus culture grounded in trust and mutual support. Ultimately, participants expressed that collaboration provided additional perspectives, resources, and relational continuity that supported both students and teachers.

Classroom Management

A second theme that was identified from the interview data was *Classroom Management*, where teachers described this as a foundational component of effective relationship-building and positive student behavior. Participants emphasized that consistent expectations, structured

routines, and intentional climate-building practices created the conditions necessary for TSRs to develop. Classroom management was described as an ongoing and reflective process. Through their experiences, teachers highlighted how consistency, structure, and a supportive classroom climate work together to reduce misbehavior and promote a sense of safety and belonging for all students.

Classroom Management depicts the intentional practices teachers used to establish and maintain a structured, predictable, and emotionally safe learning environment. In understanding this theme, teachers described the following: (1) Consistency & Follow Through, (2) Structured Routines and Procedures, and (3) Classroom Climate. Each category describing the theme is unpacked below.

Consistency & Follow Through

When discussing classroom management, teachers emphasized on the importance of being consistent and having follow through. Participants described consistency not as a one-time effort at the beginning of the school year, but as an ongoing, intentional practice that requires repeated reinforcement of expectations and routines. Monica agreed that classroom management routines are “definitely ongoing” noting that she frequently has “to follow through with some consequences” to reinforce expectations. Similarly, Chandler highlighted the sustained nature of this work, explaining, “and, you know, and just remember that... you're gonna have to repeat it the rest of the year. It doesn't stop.” These reflections illustrated that consistency was viewed as a year-long commitment rather than a front-loaded strategy.

Teachers also described the time investment required to establish consistency. Monica shared that, “it usually takes a good, I would say 3 to 4 weeks at the beginning of the year. For every student to understand and follow.” This underscores the deliberate teaching and reteaching

required to build behavioral foundations. Chandler shared that oftentimes he needs to stop to reemphasize the expectations and have students practice again, explaining, “I had to stop class...if they come into my class too loud...go back outside. Do it again.” Such practices demonstrated how consistency is operationalized through explicit modeling, practice, and corrective redirection.

Importantly, Monica connected consistency and follow-through to relational practices. Monica described integrating check-ins and check-outs as part of her management process, stating:

But I do make that a priority. At least at the beginning of the day, and then I do try to do a check-in or a check-out at the end of the day, and even with all of the testing, and with all of the amount of time that is taken for everything else, I still make it a priority, because those other things are not going to reach the results that we're expecting if the relationships are not in place?

This reflection shows how consistency was not framed as purely procedural but relational, rooted in ongoing connection, communication, and emotional monitoring. Overall, teachers viewed consistency and follow-through as foundational to effective classroom management. Participants emphasized that when expectations are reinforced with care, clarity, and relational intentionality, students are more likely to internalize behavioral expectations.

Structured Routines & Procedures

Teachers described structured routines and clearly defined procedures as another key component of effective classroom management and the development of positive TSRs. Participants described structure as a proactive strategy that helps students understand expectations, reduces uncertainty, and minimizes opportunities for misbehavior. As Monica explained, structured systems help “eliminate a lot of the possibility for misbehavior, or poor choices.” She further elaborated that she’s a firm believer in structure and routines, noting,

I have lots of structure and routine with processes and procedures. I mean, from what to do when you need a pencil, to how to ask to go to the restroom, what to do when you turn in papers, like, very, very, very structured.

This level of detail reflects how routines extended beyond major transitions to include everyday classroom functions, reinforcing predictability and accountability. Rather than immediately prioritizing academic content, teachers reported intentionally focusing on routines at the beginning of the school year to establish consistency and behavioral norms. Chandler shares his belief in prioritizing routines, explaining:

Because here's the thing. I... I do put relationships first. First week of class, routines. Yeah, maybe they want me to start teaching the curriculum, but no, come on. We know the first couple days, if you don't get the behavior down first. I... I... but if you don't have the classroom management part down, the rest is gonna go... there's just... nothing else is gonna stick anyway.

His reflection highlighted the belief that classroom management structures must precede sustained academic learning. Participants suggested that without clear systems in place, both instruction and relationship-building efforts become more difficult to maintain. Overall, teachers viewed routines and procedures not simply as organizational tools, but as relational supports that foster safety, consistency, and mutual understanding. By creating structured environments, teachers positioned themselves to build trust with students while simultaneously promoting behavioral and academic success.

Classroom Climate

Teachers described classroom climate as a final, critical component of effective management, emphasizing the importance of intentionally cultivating an environment where students feel safe, welcomed, and supported. Participants highlighted daily practices as strategies for setting the tone of the classroom.

Daily relational routines were frequently cited as strategies for setting the emotional tone of the classroom. Monica, for example, described how she actively monitors and nurtures the

classroom atmosphere from the moment students enter, noting, “I do classroom greetings when they come into the room. Like, they do not enter my room without me greeting them. And they get to choose how they get greeted every day.” She further explained that she prioritizes dedicated time for emotional check-ins, even when academic pressures compete for instructional minutes, stating, “I will forgo 10 or 15 minutes every morning to have a morning meeting, what I like to call just a check-in with my kids... I make it a priority either way.” These practices illustrate how teachers intentionally create relational entry points that communicate care, belonging, and visibility for students.

Teachers also emphasized that a positive classroom climate is inseparable from student safety, both emotional and academic. Chandler discussed the importance of creating spaces where all students feel secure enough to participate, take risks, and engage in learning activities. He shared, “Everyone reads out loud. So I make sure I establish a safe reading room. Where everyone, regardless, has that safety where you can read.” However, he also acknowledged the challenges of maintaining a positive climate when severe behaviors disrupt the environment:

It affects every other student in the classroom. They're afraid. I told you the first thing you want to do is build a safe place for reading. I can't have a safe place for reading if I have a very volatile...

This reflection highlighted the interconnectedness between behavior management and climate, demonstrating how individual student needs can influence the collective classroom experience. Overall, teachers noted the need for deliberate climate-building efforts as part of effective classroom management. By prioritizing emotional safety, visibility, and belonging, participants reinforced that positive classroom climates are foundational to both effective classroom management and the development of positive TSRs.

Intentional Relational Strategies

Another prominent theme that was identified from the interview data was *Intentional Relational Strategies*, describing the intentional practice to building relationships which required purposeful effort, self-awareness, and consistency. Participants emphasized the importance of consciously choosing relational approaches that communicate care, respect, and accountability. Across interviews, teachers described how being genuine, transparent, and emotionally available allowed them to establish trust and credibility with students. Teachers framed these strategies as critical tools for maintaining high expectations while fostering emotional safety and mutual respect. These practices demonstrated how intentional relational strategies serve as another foundation for effective classroom management, student engagement, and behavioral growth.

Intentional Relational Strategies depicts the purposeful actions teachers take to build and sustain meaningful relationships with students. These strategies include: (1) Authenticity, (2) Relational Integrity: Honesty, Trust, and Respect, and (3) Relational Presence. These practices are grounded in the belief that positive relationships must be intentionally built and maintained to support student engagement, behavior, and emotional well-being. Each category describing the theme is unpacked below.

Authenticity

Authenticity was identified as a key intentional relational strategy through which teachers intentionally built trust and connection with students. Teachers described authenticity as allowing students to see them as human, capable of humor, vulnerability, and imperfection, while still maintaining professional boundaries and high expectations. When asked what their advice would be for new teachers, Monica emphasized the importance of showing one's genuine personality in the classroom:

I mean, the biggest advice that I give them is, you know, first of all, be yourself. Like before that bell rings, you can be you can be funny, you can be goofy, you can, you know, you can be yourself.

She further encouraged new teachers to “just let them see you as a human” reinforcing the idea that relational closeness begins when students perceive teachers as authentic rather than purely authoritative figures. Similarly, Phoebe shared that openly admitting mistakes and apologizing when necessary modeled accountability and reinforced mutual respect:

No, I will maybe just always be real with the kids, you know, when you're building that relationship, admit to your own mistakes and apologize when you make them, because I'm really good about teaching my students, like, we're all human, we're all gonna make mistakes, even me, when I make them, I make sure the kids know I made a mistake, and why I made that mistake, and I think that helps build that relationship and that trust and respect.

At the same time, not all teachers shared the same belief regarding how much vulnerability should be displayed. One teacher expressed caution, noting that “you can’t show that to the kids. No room for error,” reflecting a belief that maintaining instructional authority required limiting visible uncertainty. Rather than emotional openness, this perspective emphasized on the importance of reflective self-regulation and respectful communication. Chandler described how he intentionally invites students to name moments of perceived disrespect, asking “have I been disrespectful to you?” as a way to de-escalate the situation. This strategy illustrated how authenticity can function through dialogue and relational reflection rather than personal disclosure alone. Overall, authenticity functioned as a deliberate relational practice that helped teachers humanize themselves, normalize mistakes, and create emotionally safe classroom environments. Participants viewed authentic engagement as a means of strengthening trust, respect, and student responsiveness.

Relational Integrity: Honesty, Trust, and Respect

Teachers described relational integrity as another key element of their relationship-building practices. Relational integrity refers to the intentional use of honesty, transparency, and mutual respect to establish trust with students. Participants emphasized that being truthful with students, even when conversations were difficult, was an expression of care and high expectations.

Several teachers framed this approach as balancing empathy with directness. Phoebe explained that she often shows her students “some tough love,” noting that students do not interpret her honesty as punishment, but instead recognize it as evidence that she cares about their growth. Similarly, Chandler expressed the same sentiment and described how he maintains high expectations through candid communicating, sharing, “so the kids that literally have a hard time reading out loud. I show them tough love. That's the type of teacher I am.” For these participants, honesty functioned as a relational tool that reinforced responsibility while preserving student dignity.

Teachers also connected relational integrity to the development of trust and influence. When discussing what motivates her relational approach, Monica referenced the TED talk “*Every Kid Needs a Champion*” by Rita Pierson which states, “students don't learn from people they don't like.” She expanded on this belief by explaining, “my kids are only gonna listen to me because they know that I care about them,” highlighting how respect and emotional investment shape student responsiveness.

Importantly, relational integrity was not limited to verbal honesty. It also included honoring students’ emotional boundaries. Phoebe described working with a student who was hesitant in building a relationship with her, explaining:

If they don't want a relationship, that's fine, I'll respect their boundaries, but I do just acknowledge them. It, more than anything, just let them know that I see them, you know, that I care, versus, like, sitting there having a conversation.

This perspective reflected a relational stance grounded in patience, recognition, and respect rather than forced rapport. Across interviews, teachers understand that relational integrity is important to help develop and sustain positive TSRs, particularly in moments of behavioral or academic challenges. Honest dialogue, consistent expectations, and respectful interactions were viewed as mechanisms for strengthening engagement, fostering accountability, and sustaining positive TSRs over time.

Relational Presence

Teachers described a final intentional strategy centered on showing up and being present. Participants framed this practice as extending beyond instructional time, encompassing both physical and emotional availability. Showing up involved attending school and community events, engaging in informal interactions, and demonstrating care through small but meaningful gestures that communicated recognition and value.

Participants emphasized that these actions played a significant role in strengthening relationships by helping students feel seen, valued, and supported. Phoebe shared an example of how she intentionally affirms one student through a shared birthday connection, explaining, “I always make sure to bring her a flower, you know, on our birthdays. You know, just little things.” She further reflected that “any little thing really means a lot to them,” underscoring that at times, teachers forget that those make all the difference to students.

Teachers also noted that attending extracurricular activities and school events allow students and parents to view them as part of the school community. Monica suggested going to an event like skate night or a PTA performance, while Phoebe suggested attending students’

birthday parties on the weekends. Overall, teachers described relational practices as rooted in consistency and intentionality where small actions such as showing up, remembering details, and engaging beyond academic expectations are viewed as meaningful contributions to positive TSRs.

Student Voice Matters

Student Voice Matters was identified as a defining theme, where teachers consistently emphasized that student voice played a critical role in relationship-building and behavior support. Participants described how providing students with opportunities for choice, input, and personal expression fostered greater engagement, motivation, and behavioral ownership. Teachers highlighted the importance of listening to students, understanding what matters to them, and involving them in decisions related to classroom routines, behavior goals, and learning experiences.

Student Voice Matters depicts how teachers described their intentional efforts to honor students' perspectives, preferences, and lived experiences by offering meaningful opportunities for choice, input, and personal connection. This captured how honoring students' perspectives and individuality contributed to positive relationships and more responsive behavioral practices. In understanding this theme, teachers described the following: (1) Student Agency and Buy-In, and (2) Personal Connections. Each category describing the theme is unpacked below.

Student Agency and Buy-In

Student agency was identified as a central relational strategy that teachers used to foster engagement, motivation, and positive behavior. Across interviews, participants described designing relational and behavioral supports that positioned students as active contributors rather than passive recipients of classroom expectations.

Teachers frequently discussed involving students directly in goal setting and behavior planning process. For example, when developing behavior improvement plans, Monica included the student in creating and implementing the plan. She shared:

He knows that at the end of the day, if he has reached his goal, 80% of his goal, then he gets awarded his points, and then if he can go 10 consecutive days of meeting his goal, the whole class gets a reward. He told me that the thing that means the most to him is peer acceptance.

By incorporating the student's personal motivation, peer acceptance, into the structure of the plan Monica fostered both accountability and investment. Her approach illustrated how relational knowledge of students informed behavior supports, increasing the likelihood of student buy-in and sustained efforts.

Teachers also emphasized that when students felt their voices mattered, they were more likely to invest in classroom expectations and demonstrate improved self-regulation. Chandler framed student agency as empowering students to see their own potential, sharing:

There's no reason why you shouldn't have every opportunity in the world given to you, I just want to... like, building relationships with these kids, I just want to let them know you can have anything you want. I just want to make sure that they understand the opportunities that they can have.

This perspective positioned relationship-building as a vehicle for helping students recognize their capabilities and assume ownership over their growth. Similarly, Phoebe described how creating spaces where students could experience success fostered both confidence and behavioral engagement. Reflecting on her art classroom, she noted, "kids enjoy coming to my class, and where they might not shine academically in math or ELA, they're, you know, shining in here, so it makes them feel special or important." Providing alternative avenues for student voice and expression allowed students to feel seen and valued, particularly when they struggled in traditional academic settings. Overall, across interviews, teachers described student agency not

simply as offering choice, but as intentionally listening to students, explaining the rationale behind expectations, and aligning supports with students' goals and identities. These practices cultivated relational trust while strengthening students' emotional investment in classroom norms.

Personal Connections

Personal connections was identified as another important strategy through which teachers honored student voices and fostered meaningful engagement. Participants described relationship-building as an intentional, individualized process that required time, attention, and responsiveness to students' emotional, cultural, and developmental needs. Rather than relying solely on whole-group interactions, teachers emphasized the importance of knowing students as individuals and creating moments for one-on-one connection.

Monica described how she intentionally structures time at the beginning of the school year to build individualized rapport. She explained that she spends "2 to 3 minutes with 3 to 4 students daily" and asks them personal questions about themselves and asking about their interests, emphasizing that she frames these exchanges as "more of a personal conversation" rather than a whole-class activity.

Similarly, Phoebe described her personal motivation to building relationships, noting, "I like creating that rapport with students, because then they do have better behavior in my class. Or we can have more real conversations." She further illustrated how she builds connections across linguistic differences by using her limited Spanish and referencing students' interests, such as characters displayed on backpacks or water bottles, as conversational bridges. These small but intentional gestures signaled to students that their identities and interests were recognized and valued.

Teachers also highlighted how personal connections supported students' ability to reflect on their behavior and repair relationships following conflict. When positive rapport existed, students were more willing to apologize, accept responsibility, and engage in problem-solving conversations. Monica shared an example of when having positive rapport with the student, de-escalated a behavioral situation:

And, because we did have a positive relationship, I was able to get him to calm down, step out of the room for a moment, take a deep breath, explain what happened, and then we were able to kind of talk through a better response to what had happened, and, how we could work on dealing with something like that differently in the future.

In this instance, the relationship functioned as a regulatory support, enabling the student to process emotions and reengage productively. Phoebe described a similar experience with a younger student, explaining that because she understood the child's need for comfort, she was able to offer a hug, helping the student de-escalate and return to learning. These examples demonstrated how personal knowledge of students' emotional needs informed responsive behavioral support.

At the same time, teachers acknowledged that relationship-building is not always immediate or guaranteed. One teacher also described moments of frustration and vulnerability when attempts to connect with certain students were not reciprocated, sharing, "I've always been able to find some type of connection with every one of my students, and with this particular one, I just couldn't. It was really hard to accept that it wasn't me." This emphasized that relationship-building is not always linear or guaranteed. Overall, these personal connections were viewed as essential to creating safe, supportive learning environments where students felt seen, valued, and heard. By investing time in individualized interactions, teachers elevated student voice, strengthened relational trust, and fostered environments that supported both emotional well-being and behavioral growth.

Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building

The final theme that was identified from interview data, *Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building*, highlights the structural and systemic constraints that influenced teachers' ability to build and maintain positive relationships with students. While participants consistently emphasized the importance of relationship-building as central behavior support and classroom success, they also described a range of institutional conditions that limited the time, resources, and training necessary to engage in this work effectively. Teachers spoke honestly about competing instructional demands, limited professional development focused on relational practices, staffing shortages, shifting behavioral policies, and the increasing complexity of student behavioral needs.

Institutional Constraints on Relationship-Building depicts how institutional, organizational, and policy-related conditions limit teachers' capacity to consistently build and sustain positive TSRs. While teachers consistently valued relationships as foundational, these systemic conditions often shaped, restricted, or complicated their efforts. In understanding this theme, teachers described the following: (1) Time Constraints and Lack of Professional Development, (2) Lack of District Support and Guidance, and (3) Rising Behavioral Challenges. Each category describing the theme is unpacked below.

Time Constraints and Lack of Professional Development

Participants consistently described limited time and insufficient professional development as a barrier to building and sustaining meaningful TSRs. Although teachers valued relational practices, they emphasized that relationships require time, intentionality, and ongoing support, conditions that were often constrained by testing schedules, instructional demands, and fragmented access to students.

Phoebe, an art teacher, expressed particular frustration with the limited time she has to cultivate relationships due to her rotational schedule and testing interruptions. She shared:

I have kids miss whole weeks with me because of testing situations” and “seeing them for a limited amount of time, definitely. You know, it makes a difference, for sure. Yeah, just not enough time.

She further explained that behavioral growth differed between students she saw consistently and those she saw sporadically, emphasizing, “they’re not just gonna change overnight.” Monica echoed this sentiment, reinforcing that relational development is gradual and that meaningful connections “don’t happen overnight.”

Beyond time constraints, teachers also pointed to gaps in professional development related to relationship-building. While behavior management frameworks such as PBIS and CHAMPS were referenced, participants noted that training often focused on systems and procedures rather than the relational competencies required to support students’ social-emotional and behavioral needs. CHAMPS (Conversation, Help, Activity, Movement, Participation, Success) is a framework that helps teachers create successful classroom management plans. The purpose is to help teachers create a positive classroom community where they help students develop social-emotional skills for life (Sprick et al., 2021). Chandler shares his thoughts on PBIS:

It's controversial in a lot of ways. Because... You know, sometimes you think that the reality of school isn't built for reality. It's still built on the expectations back at least 20, 30 years of how society was. Things are different.

His reflection suggested a perceived disconnect between institutional behavior frameworks and the evolving relational and behavioral needs of students. Similarly, Monica acknowledged the benefits of PBIS but emphasized the importance of consistent implementation, explaining that when “you have 2 or 3 teachers or staff members that don’t follow it and it doesn’t work.”

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or PBIS is a framework for delivering both the

whole-school social culture and additional tiers of behavior support intensity needed to improve educational and social outcomes for all students (Horner & Sugai, 2015). She further noted that much of her relational practice was not learned through formal training but through personal life experiences, stating that many of her relationship-building strategies stemmed from being a parent and having children involved in sports. Collectively, participants described relationship-building as complex, time-intensive work that cannot be accelerated through short-term interventions or isolated training. Instead, they emphasized the need for sustained time with students and more targeted professional learning opportunities that center relational practice as foundational to classroom management and student behavior.

Lack of District Support and Guidance

Participants described a lack of district-level support and clear guidance when addressing complex student behavioral and mental health needs. While teachers generally perceived their campus administrators as supportive and well-intentioned, they emphasized that administrators themselves were often constrained by limited resources, shifting policies, and unclear district procedures.

When reflecting on current behavioral policies, Monica expressed a sense of professional restriction, explaining, “I just feel like teachers' hands are tied. There's only so much that we can do, and there's only so much we can say. We're afraid to say or do too much now.” Her statement highlighted how evolving policy expectations and liability concerns may limit teachers’ autonomy in responding to student needs, particularly in behavior-related situations.

Teachers also expressed frustration with inconsistent systems for referrals, inadequate access to counseling and services, and prolonged delays in securing appropriate placements or interventions for students with significant behavioral challenges. Chandler described significant

gaps in available support structures, stating bluntly, “We don't have a counselor. We're not prepared for the amount of behavior.” He further noted that the documentation and referral procedures required to secure support were “very draining,” describing the process as time-consuming and emotionally taxing while already managing classroom responsibilities.

Chandler shared a particularly challenging case involving a student with a history of severe behavioral incidents. He expressed concern about the district’s delayed response, explaining that the district “is kind of dragging its feet,” despite the severity of the situation. He added that even district leadership was aware, stating, “The Superintendent knows this kid by name...It’s not a new issue. I inherited it. But I’m not gonna tolerate it in my classroom.” His account illustrated the disconnect teachers sometimes experience between the urgency of classroom realities and the pace of district-level intervention. Overall, teachers’ accounts illustrated how gaps in district-level systems often placed additional emotional and procedural burdens on classroom teachers, particularly when working with students requiring intensive behavioral support. These systemic limitations often complicated teachers’ efforts to build and sustain positive TSRs, particularly when working with students requiring intensive behavioral or mental health support.

Rising Behavioral Challenges

Teachers described a noticeable and ongoing increase in the frequency, intensity, and complexity of student behavioral challenges, which they perceived as significantly more difficult to manage than in previous years. Participants attributed this shift to a combination of post-pandemic impacts and insufficient systemic preparedness to support students with high behavioral and emotional needs.

Monica reflected on the broader trajectory of student behavior, explaining, “I know since COVID, just behaviors have become more and more challenging.” Similarly, Phoebe acknowledged the growing strain behavioral issues have placed on classroom instruction, sharing, “It's challenging. It obviously, like all teachers, has its ups and downs. Behavior being down. That's, I think, the biggest struggle the last couple years.” Echoing this sentiment, Chandler offered a more direct assessment of the profession’s readiness, stating, “nobody is prepared for the amount of behaviors we are dealing with in education.” Collectively, these participants highlight a shared belief that the behavioral landscape of classrooms has shifted in ways that exceed traditional preparation and support structures.

As behavioral incidents escalated, teachers reported that managing safety, disruption, and crisis situations increasingly displaced instructional time, limiting opportunities. Rather than focusing primarily on teaching and learning, participants described spending significant portions of their day responding to behavioral incidents. Phoebe explained that behavior challenges often “take over from me focusing on better-behaved students,” highlighting how the needs of a few students can redirect attention away from the broader classroom community.

In more severe cases, teachers described confronting behaviors that raised immediate safety concerns. Chandler recounted an experience with a student whose aggression required formal intervention:

I had a violent student this year. I actually filed for a removal for this student in my classroom. You can't be hitting little girls under my watch. And supposedly it's been going on for years. But I had him, at the end of the day, where his behavior is always the worst.

This account underscored how escalating behaviors not only disrupt instruction but also create emotional strain and ethical responsibility for teachers tasked with protecting all students in the classroom. Overall, participants’ narratives reflected a shared sense that behavioral demands

have intensified in ways that fundamentally alter the teaching role, forcing educators to prioritize crisis management over instruction.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study using a mixed methods approach. Quantitative findings were reported first and consisted of survey results analyzed using descriptive statistics that summarized elementary teachers' perceptions of positive TSRs, relationship-building practices, motivations, and perceived challenges. Survey data were presented by section, allowing for a clear examination of patterns and trends across the five survey domains. Following the quantitative results, qualitative findings were presented based on a thematic analysis of interview data collected from three elementary teachers. Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in the identification of five major themes that captured teachers' experiences, beliefs, and practices related to relationship-building and student behavior. These themes provided context and examples that expanded upon the survey findings. Together, the quantitative and qualitative findings offered a comprehensive view of how elementary teachers perceive the role of positive TSRs in influencing behavior. Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in relation to the study's research questions and relevant literature, limitations, as well as explore implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter presents a discussion of the study's findings and their implications for research and practice. The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods study was to examine elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive teachers-student relationships on student classroom behavior. The chapter begins with a summary of the quantitative and qualitative results and examined how the findings addressed the study's research questions. The following research questions reflect the study's focus and are categorized by phase that aligned with the mixed-methods framework.

The primary quantitative research question examined how elementary teachers perceived the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student classroom behavior. This is followed by two supporting quantitative research questions that examined how elementary teachers rated the importance of various relationship-building practices and examined how elementary teachers perceived the reduction of disruptive behavior in the classroom through positive teacher-student relationships.

The primary qualitative research question examined the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive teachers to build relationships and how they believe these relationships influenced student behavior. This is followed by two supporting qualitative research questions that examined the systemic, instructional, and relational barriers teachers encountered and examined how teachers believe relationship-building shapes student behavior, classroom climate, and overall management practices.

Lastly, the mixed-methods research question, integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings examined how elementary teachers perceive the influence of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior and sought to explain the factors that shaped or contributed to

those perceptions. A joint display was used to integrate the quantitative survey results with the qualitative interview themes, highlighting points of convergence across the two phases of the data.

The chapter then highlights the implications of these findings for educators and educational leaders, followed by recommendations for future research and limitations of the research study. The chapter concludes with a summary that synthesizes the key insights of the study and situates the findings within the broader context of teacher-student relationships and classroom behavior.

Summary of Findings

This section provides an integrated summary of findings organized by research questions. Quantitative survey results and qualitative interview themes are discussed together and interpreted in relation to the existing literature that provided a comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive and enact relationship-building practices in relation to student behavior as well as alignment with the theoretical framework. The Motivating TSRs framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand the findings of this study regarding elementary teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior and the importance of relationship-building practices. According to Robinson (2022), for teachers to engage consistently and effectively in relationship-building behaviors, they must hold motivational beliefs that such efforts are part of their role, value the importance of TSRs, and believe they possess the efficacy to build these positive relationships.

Quantitative Findings

Primary Quantitative RQ: Perceived Impact of TSRs on Student Behavior

The first quantitative research question examined how elementary teachers perceived the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student classroom behavior. Quantitative findings from the survey section *Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior*, revealed strong agreement across all items, with teachers reporting that positive relationships increased student engagement, motivation to follow rules, and overall classroom climate while reducing disruptive behavior.

Notably, all participants agreed that positive TSRs contributed to a more positive overall classroom. These perceptions were further supported by qualitative findings, as teachers described relationships as foundational to behavioral regulation and emotional responsiveness. Participants shared that students with whom they had connections demonstrated greater accountability and were more receptive to redirection. These reflections illustrate Robinson's (2022) framework's emphasis on how teachers' beliefs drive sustained relational behaviors that foster trust and behavioral growth over time. They also emphasized that having positive rapport with students gave them the opportunity to de-escalate behavioral situations more often.

These findings align with existing literature highlighting that positive, warm, and supportive teacher-student relationships are essential and align with the principles of attachment theory, which suggest that secure relationships can foster better emotional and behavioral outcomes for students (Thornberg et al., 2020). Additionally, existing literature highlights relationships form the foundation of a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued, understood, and motivated to succeed further aligning with the idea that positive TSRs is a critical factor in educational outcomes (e.g., Fraser & Walberg, 2005; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Wentzel, 1999). Together, the integrated findings suggested that teachers view relationship-building not as a supportive practice, but as a central component of

effective classroom management. These integrated findings support Robinson's Motivating TSRs framework by illustrating that teachers' perceptions of TSRs as central to behavior management. This suggests that efforts to improve classroom behavior through TSRs should not only focus on teaching relationship-building skills but also address strengthening teachers' motivational beliefs to sustain these practices.

Quantitative Sub-RQ 1: Perceived Importance of Relationship-Building Practices

The first quantitative sub-research question examined how elementary teachers rated the importance of various relationship-building practices in fostering positive student behavior. Quantitative findings from survey sections *Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies* and *Frequency of Use of Strategies*, provided insight into how elementary teachers perceived the role of specific relationship-building practices in supportive positive student behavior, as well as how frequently these strategies are enacted in classroom settings.

Teachers rated relational practices as highly important components of effective behavior support, reinforcing the belief that behavior management is connected to the quality of teacher-student relationships (Robinson, 2022). Teachers identified practices rooted in empathy, fairness, respect, encouragement, and communication as particularly important for fostering positive behavior. Strategies such as showing empathy toward students, providing consistent communication, and being fair and respectful were rated among the most important. These findings suggested that teachers view emotional attunement and relational trust as central mechanisms through which behavioral improvement occurs. This reflects teachers' valuation of TSRs as essential, consistent with Robinson's assertion that valuing relationships energizes teachers to prioritize and enact these behaviors. Furthermore, the use of these relational strategies mirrors the relational self-efficacy component of the framework, indicating that teachers not only

believe in the importance of connection but also feel competent in their relational skills. Additionally, teachers rated verbal encouragement and incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and interests into instruction as equally important strategies. These strategies were further emphasized by qualitative findings, as teachers highlighted the importance of being truthful with students, even when conversations were difficult and stated the importance of listening to students, understanding what matters to them, and involving them in decisions is a strategy they often used. Participants also emphasized the importance of consciously choosing relational approaches that communicated care, respect, and accountability. Across interviews, teachers described how being genuine, transparent, and emotionally available allowed them to establish trust and credibility with students.

These findings align with existing literature highlighting that a foundational strategy for cultivating TSRs is the provision of emotional support. Teachers can demonstrate care and concern through verbal affirmations, empathetic listening, and responsive interactions (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Ahnert et al., 2006). Additionally, previous research highlights the importance of creating a supportive classroom climate as another essential component, where teachers intentionally foster an environment built on respect, empathy, and collaboration (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Together, the integrated findings suggested that elementary teachers conceptualized behavior support as fundamentally relational rather than procedural. The findings indicated a shared belief that positive student behavior is cultivated through emotional connection and relational trust.

Quantitative Sub-RQ 2: Perceived Reduction of Disruptive Behavior through TSRs

The second quantitative sub-research question examined how elementary teachers perceived the reduction of disruptive behavior in the classroom through positive teacher-student

relationships. Quantitative findings from the survey section *Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior*, specifically statements 1 and 5, indicated strong participant agreement that positive teacher-student relationships reduced disruptive behavior and contributed to reductions in behavioral problems. These perceptions were further supported by qualitative findings as teachers shared different instances where their positive relationship and personal connections supported students' ability to reflect on their behavior and helped deescalate a behavioral situation, reinforcing that students who face behavioral challenges often show significant improvement when positive TSRs are present (Helker & Ray, 2009). Both Monica and Phoebe shared an example of a disruptive student who entered the classroom dysregulated and were able to use the relationship they've built with the student and personal knowledge of the students' emotional needs to help the student process their emotions and reengage productively.

These findings align with existing literature highlighting that when students feel respected and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to demonstrate cooperative behavior and participate actively in class (Thornberg et al., 2020). Additionally, research has shown that when students feel supported and understood, they are more likely to develop trust in their teacher, leading to improved behavior and greater emotional investment in learning (Baker, 2006). Collectively, the integrated findings suggested that positive teacher-student relationships fostered trust, increased student effort, reduced disruptive behavior, and supported behavioral growth over time which reinforces Robinson (2022) framework's core assertion that fostering and sustaining teacher beliefs about the importance and feasibility of TSRs is pivotal for supporting students' behavioral and emotional needs effectively.

Qualitative Findings

Primary Qualitative RQ: Teacher Motivations and Perceived Behavioral Impact of TSRs

The first qualitative research question examined the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drove teachers to build relationships and how they believed these relationships influenced student behavior. Quantitative findings from survey section *Motivations for Building Relationships*, revealed teachers most supported building relationships because they cared about students' long-term success and because their personal teaching philosophy prioritized positive relationships which reinforced the belief that teachers who feel a genuine connection and sense of responsibility toward their students are more likely to foster positive interactions and create supportive classroom environments (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The quantitative findings suggested that intrinsic motivations play a central role which is further supported by the qualitative findings. This resonates with Robinson's (2022) discussion that while extrinsic factors like school policy may shape some beliefs, the importance of personal and professional values play a more substantial role in driving teachers' relationship-building behaviors. Collectively, these motivations reflected beliefs rooted in care, equity, behavioral support, and relational trust. Monica was motivated by a belief that emotional connection is foundational to student influence and engagement. She referenced the Ted Talk "Every Kid Needs a Champion" by Rita Pierson which states, "students don't learn from people they don't like." Phoebe explained that developing rapport with students leads to improved behavior and more meaningful dialogue, as to the reason behind her motivation. Chandler's motivation was rooted in equity and student empowerment. He shared that building relationships with his students is a way to affirm students' worth and expand their sense of possibility and wanted to help students recognize their

potential and opportunities. These findings align with existing literature highlighting that intrinsic motivations, such as a passion for teaching, a desire to positively impact students' lives, and a belief in the transformative power of relationships, drive many educators to invest time and effort into fostering meaningful connections (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Additionally, it supported the research that emphasized teachers who feel a genuine connection and sense of responsibility toward their students are more likely to foster positive interactions and create supportive classroom environments (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Notably, the quantitative findings from survey section *Motivations for Building Relationships*, further revealed survey items related to external expectations such as building relationships because of school expectations to maintain classroom order, received the lowest mean rating indicating comparatively weaker agreement among participants implying that teachers differed in the extent to which institutional expectations, rather than personal beliefs, motivated their relationship-building practices. These findings showed a possible misalignment with existing literature suggesting that policies promoting stable and supportive classroom environments may enhance student motivation and school success (Baker, 2006). Furthermore, the relatively low endorsement of school mandates as motivators suggest another potential misalignment between policy-driven expectations and teachers' personal motivations, underscoring Robinson's (2022) point that sociocultural contexts, including school and policy environments, can both facilitate and undermine the development of teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs.

Together, these findings suggested that teachers' motivations for relationship-building extend beyond classroom management, relying more on intrinsic motivations than extrinsic factors and affirm the core premise that teachers' intrinsic motivational beliefs about their roles,

values, and abilities underpin their commitment to building positive TSRs and consequently shape classroom climate and student behavior.

Qualitative Sub-RQ 1: Barriers to TSRs and Strategies for Navigating Challenges

The first qualitative sub-research question examined the systemic, instructional, and relational barriers teachers encountered. Quantitative findings from survey section *Challenges and Barriers*, provided insight on current barriers and challenges teachers faced when trying to build positive TSRs.

Overall, participants reported moderate to high agreement with several structural and contextual barriers that limited their ability to engage in relationship-building. Large class sizes presented as a notable challenge, with teachers generally agreeing that class size made it difficult to build relationships, participants also reported that systemic or school-wide pressures, such as testing, reduced the time they can spend on relationship-building. Notably, quantitative findings suggested that while time limitations are a barrier for many of the teachers, the extent of this challenge varied across participants. Systemic or school-wide pressures and time constraints were a challenge further supported through qualitative findings. There was no notable mention of large class sizes being a challenge to interview participants. Across interviews, teachers spoke honestly about instructional demands and limited time. One teacher in particular expressed frustration with the limited time she has to cultivate relationships due to testing interruptions. She explained how students miss whole weeks with her because of testing and how seeing them for a limited amount of time makes a difference in the time she invests in relationship-building. These findings align with research highlighting how institutional pressures, such as high stakes testing and standardized performance measures, often leave teachers with limited flexibility to engage in relational work (Pianta & Allen, 2008; Robinson, 2022).

Furthermore, quantitative findings noted that participants tended to disagree with the statement that they need more training to help build and maintain teacher-student relationships which doesn't align to qualitative findings where teachers expressed a need for more professional development. While behavior management frameworks such as PBIS and CHAMPS were referenced, teachers stated that training often focused on systems and procedures rather than the relational competencies required to support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs. These findings align with literature stating how professional development focused on relational practices is critical. Training programs that emphasized the importance of TSRs can enhance educators' interpersonal skills and their capacity to connect with diverse learners. Workshops that included strategies for effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional responsiveness are particularly beneficial (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This further aligns with Helker & Ray (2009) who stated that teacher training programs that focus on relationship-building skills have been shown to not only improve the quality of teacher-student interactions but also decrease externalizing behaviors across classroom settings. Furthermore, this also reflects Robinson's (2022) argument that many teacher training programs emphasize procedural or behavioral management frameworks at the expense of relational skills. As Robinson notes, relational self-efficacy and valuing TSRs are critical beliefs that motivate teachers to invest in relationships, and professional development targeting communication, emotional responsiveness, and conflict resolution can bolster these competencies.

Additionally, qualitative findings provided insight on other challenges teachers faced in relationship-building that may not have been stated through the survey. For instance, teachers expressed frustration with inconsistent systems for referrals and inadequate access to counseling and services as well as a shift in current behavioral policies highlighting how evolving policy

expectations and liability concerns limited teachers' autonomy in responding to student needs, particularly with behavior-related situations. These qualitative findings align with literature that highlights how systemic inconsistencies in behavior policies and school-wide support systems can limit teachers' relational capacity. In schools where expectations around discipline and student support vary or are unclear, teachers may feel uncertain about how to respond to students' social-emotional needs (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

A second and arguably, most important challenge mentioned across interviews and not through quantitative findings was the rising behavior in classrooms, particularly with students who display more aggressive behavior. Teachers described a noticeable and ongoing increase in the frequency, intensity, and complexity of student behavioral challenges, which they perceived as significantly more difficult to manage than in previous years reinforcing students who are disruptive, aggressive, or disengaged may inadvertently strain interactions with teachers, making it more difficult to establish trust (Thornberg et al., 2020). Teachers stated how behaviors have become increasingly challenging and has been one of the biggest struggles over the last couple of years and shared how nobody is prepared for the amount of behaviors they're all dealing with in education. Participants reflected and shared that behavioral demands have intensified in ways that forced educators to prioritize crisis management over instruction. Robinson (2022) suggests that difficulties in managing disruptive or aggressive behaviors can strain TSRs, intensify teachers' stress, and challenge their motivation, particularly without sufficient supports. Together, these findings suggested that relationship-building is not limited by teacher willingness, but by constitutional conditions that influenced how consistently and effectively these practices can be implemented.

The first qualitative sub-research question also examined the strategies teachers used to navigate and overcome these challenges. As teachers described the challenges they face, there were few mentions on how they overcame these. Qualitative findings highlighted the different strategies teachers used to build relationships with their students but not necessarily how they navigated and overcame challenges. Across interviews, teachers noted institutional constraints such as limited time, resources and training. Teachers emphasized that although there are time constraints, they prioritized relational practices even when academic pressures competed for instructional minutes as well as being intentional when they structured time at the beginning of the school year to help build individualized rapport. Participants also shared that much of their relational practice was not learned through professional development but through personal life experiences such as being a parent.

Rising behavioral challenge was another main challenge teachers described. There were several strategies teachers noted that have helped with this ongoing challenge, however, there were also moments of vulnerability shared when teachers admitted that these strategies may not always be effective. Participants shared that building connections and rapport with their students have been effective in de-escalating behavioral situations which reinforces that when students feel supported and understood, they are more likely to develop trust in their teacher, leading to improved behavior and greater emotional investment in learning (Baker, 2006). Teachers also emphasized that even highly intentional relational strategies may not be sufficient. Participants each described a time when they were met with resistance as they tried to build relationships with particular students which aligns with the concept that the influence of TSRs and student behavior is bidirectional (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015).

Qualitative Sub-RQ 2: Perceived Influence of TSRs on Behavior and Classroom Management

The second qualitative sub-research question examined how teachers believe relationship-building shaped student behavior, classroom climate, and overall management practices. Quantitative findings from the survey section *Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior*, specifically statements 3 and 4, indicated strong participant agreement that positive teacher-student relationships improved the overall classroom environments and increased students' motivation to follow classroom rules. However, qualitative findings emphasized that consistent expectations, structured routines, and intentional climate-building practices helped create the conditions necessary for TSRs to develop which aligns with Robinson's (2022) argument that classroom management and relationship-building are interdependent processes. Specifically, Robinson notes that teachers typically set the norms and climate for classroom interactions, influencing both TSRs and student behavior. Across interviews, teachers highlighted how consistency, structure, and a supportive classroom climate work together to reduce misbehavior and promote a sense of safety and belonging for all students. This further aligns with literature that notes successful classroom management requires building positive personal relationships with students (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Research also states that when teachers intentionally foster an environment built on respect, empathy, and collaboration, students are more likely to feel valued and included (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Explanatory Mixed Methods Findings

Mixed Methods RQ: Integrated perceptions and explanatory factors of TSR impact on student behavior.

This mixed-methods research question examined how elementary teachers perceived the influence of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior and explained the factors that shaped or contributed to those perceptions through the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings. This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, in which the integration of quantitative and qualitative data is central to addressing the overarching research question holistically. Teachers who completed the survey were given the opportunity to volunteer for follow-up qualitative participation. Teachers with varied responses on key survey items, such as those rating the impact of TSRs on behavior particularly high or low, were purposely selected to provide richer context and explanation which aligns with Bloomberg's (2023) emphasis on connecting data sources and maintaining congruence across mixed methods components.

The quantitative findings revealed that teachers overwhelmingly perceived positive teacher-student relationships as important contributors to improved student behavior, classroom engagement, and overall classroom climate. Teachers rated relational practices such as empathy, fairness, communication, encouragement, and respect as highly important for fostering positive behavior. At the same time, survey results indicated that teachers experienced systemic challenges that may have affected their ability to consistently implement these practices, including time constraints, large class sizes, and school-wide pressures such as testing demands.

The qualitative findings provided deeper insight into these patterns by illustrating how teachers experienced and navigated these relational practices in everyday classroom contexts. Through interviews, teachers described relationship-building as foundational to both classroom management and student behavioral regulation. Participants emphasized strategies such as authenticity, relational integrity, collaboration with families and colleagues, and honoring

student voice as key components of effective relationship-building. However, teachers also described institutional constraints that complicated these efforts, including limited time, inconsistent district systems for behavioral support, rising behavioral challenges among students, and insufficient professional development focused on relational competencies.

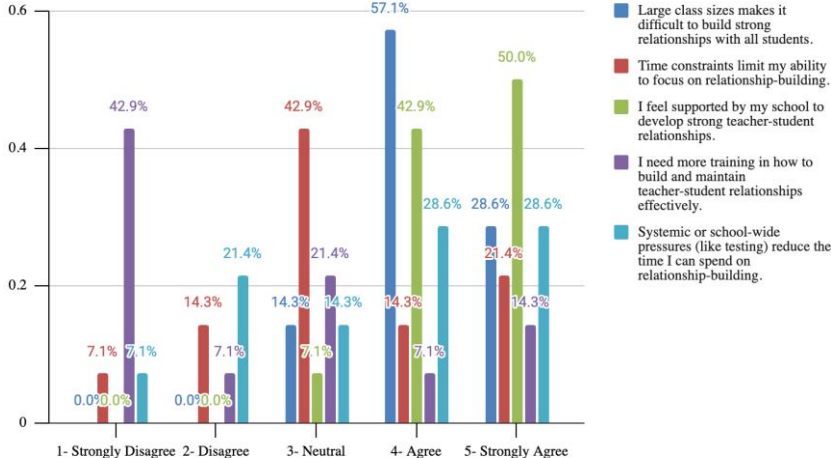
Findings related to this mixed-methods research question suggested that while elementary teachers overwhelmingly valued relationship-building, they also navigated multiple contextual barriers that influenced the extent to which these practices can be implemented consistently. Teachers expressed intrinsic motivation to build meaningful relationships with students, yet the broader institutional environment often shaped how these relational practices are enacted within the classroom.

To illustrate the convergence of these findings, a joint display was developed (see Table 5.1). This table integrated quantitative survey trends with qualitative interview themes, allowing for comparison across data strands. The joint display demonstrated alignment in areas such as time constraints and school-wide pressures, while also highlighting points of expansion, particularly the qualitative emphasis on district-level gaps and the rise of behavioral challenges. By integrating both data sources, the display provided a more comprehensive understanding of the structural and contextual factors shaping teachers' relational practices.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that teacher-student relationships function as both a behavioral support strategy and a relational foundation for classroom engagement. While teachers believed in the power of positive relationships to influence behavior, the findings also underscored the importance of institutional supports that enabled teachers to consistently prioritize relational practices within increasingly complex classroom environments which mirrors Robinson's (2022) Motivating TSRs Frameworks which

proposes that the quality of TSRs is largely influenced by teachers' motivational beliefs, which are shaped by their sociocultural contexts.

Table 5.1- Joint Display of the Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative: Survey Responses for Challenges & Barriers (n=14 participants)	Qualitative: Teacher Responses on Challenges & Barriers (n=3 teachers)																																				
 Legend: - Large class sizes makes it difficult to build strong relationships with all students. - Time constraints limit my ability to focus on relationship-building. - I feel supported by my school to develop strong teacher-student relationships. - I need more training in how to build and maintain teacher-student relationships effectively. - Systemic or school-wide pressures (like testing) reduce the time I can spend on relationship-building. <table><tr><th>Challenge</th><th>1- Strongly Disagree</th><th>2- Disagree</th><th>3- Neutral</th><th>4- Agree</th><th>5- Strongly Agree</th></tr><tr><td>Large class sizes</td><td>0.0%</td><td>0.0%</td><td>14.3%</td><td>57.1%</td><td>28.6%</td></tr><tr><td>Time constraints</td><td>7.1%</td><td>14.3%</td><td>42.9%</td><td>14.3%</td><td>21.4%</td></tr><tr><td>School support</td><td>0.0%</td><td>0.0%</td><td>7.1%</td><td>42.9%</td><td>50.0%</td></tr><tr><td>Training needs</td><td>0.0%</td><td>0.0%</td><td>21.4%</td><td>7.1%</td><td>14.3%</td></tr><tr><td>Systemic pressures</td><td>0.0%</td><td>21.4%</td><td>14.3%</td><td>28.6%</td><td>28.6%</td></tr></table>	Challenge	1- Strongly Disagree	2- Disagree	3- Neutral	4- Agree	5- Strongly Agree	Large class sizes	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	57.1%	28.6%	Time constraints	7.1%	14.3%	42.9%	14.3%	21.4%	School support	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	42.9%	50.0%	Training needs	0.0%	0.0%	21.4%	7.1%	14.3%	Systemic pressures	0.0%	21.4%	14.3%	28.6%	28.6%	<u>Lack of Professional Development & Time Constraints:</u> - Phoebe expressed her frustration as an art teacher having limited time with students to build meaningful relationships. She shared, “<i>I have kids miss whole weeks with me because of testing situations</i>” and “<i>seeing them for a limited amount of time, definitely. You know, it makes a difference, for sure. Yeah, just not enough time.</i>” She explained the progress in behavior with students she’s had to build a relationship versus a student she doesn’t have one with, she says, “<i>they’re not just gonna change overnight.</i>” <u>Lack of District Support and Guidance:</u> - When asked to reflect on the current policies in place, Monica shared, “<i>I just feel like teachers' hands are tied. There's only so much that we can do, and there's only so much we can say. We're afraid to say or do too much now.</i>” - Chandler shared his experience with his district’s staff shortage and said, “<i>We don't have a counselor. We're not prepared for the amount of behavior.</i>” He expressed his frustration with the amount of documentation needed and how “<i>it's very draining</i>”. Chandler explained that he received a challenging student this year who has been hurting other students and is concerned that the district “<i>is kind of dragging its feet</i>”, and how the Superintendent knows this kid by name and understands the situation but has not offered support or clear guidance, he said, “<i>It's not a new issue. I inherited it. But I'm not gonna tolerate it in my classroom.</i>” <u>Rising Behavioral Challenges:</u> - Monica shared her perspective, “<i>I know since COVID, just behaviors have become more and more challenging.</i>” Similarly, Phoebe shared, “<i>It's challenging. It obviously, like all teachers, has its ups and downs. Behavior being down. That's, I think, the biggest struggle the last couple years</i>” and Chandler shared, “<i>nobody is prepared for the amount of behaviors we are dealing with in education.</i>”
Challenge	1- Strongly Disagree	2- Disagree	3- Neutral	4- Agree	5- Strongly Agree																																
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Implications

The findings of this study offered several important implications. By examining both quantitative and qualitative perspectives, this study highlighted how TSRs influence classroom behavior and identified conditions that supported or constrained relational practices in elementary settings. The implications of these findings reach across four key areas: teachers, teacher education and professional development, school administrators, and theory.

Implications for Teachers

The findings of this study suggested several implications for elementary teachers seeking to foster positive student behavior through relationship-building. These align with current research that highlights how positive TSRs are associated with improved student engagement, academic achievement, behavioral regulation, and overall well-being (Roorda et al., 2011).

First, it's important that teachers see relationship-building as a core responsibility rather than optional. The responsibility for initiating and nurturing these relationships rests heavily on the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). They play a critical role in creating emotionally supportive environments that promote trust, respect, and mutual understanding (Thornberg et al., 2020). Findings and research demonstrated that positive TSRs are closely tied to improved engagement, reduced disruptive behavior, and classroom climate (Robinson, 2022; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). As such, teachers should intentionally cultivate trust, empathy, and mutual respect with their students.

Second, relationship-building should extend beyond students to include families and professional colleagues. Across interviews, data emphasized the importance of parent relationships in reinforcing behavioral expectations and creating consistency between home and school. Teachers also described collaboration with colleagues and administrators as necessary

when navigating challenging student behaviors. Both the findings and research emphasize this as an effective practice where incorporating multiple perspectives into relationship-building can help strengthen TSRs by soliciting feedback on relational practices not only from students and families but also from colleagues. Understanding these perceptions will enable educators to make informed adjustments to their approach (Brok et al., 2006; Helmke and Lenske, 2013).

Third, the findings highlighted the importance of prioritizing relationship-building at the beginning of the school year and maintaining consistency throughout. Participants emphasized that positive classroom relationships require time, repetition, and ongoing follow-through. Establishing routines, modeling expectations, and conducting regular check-ins early in the year can create a relational foundation that supports long-term behavioral growth (La Paro et al., 2004; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Additionally, as teachers build relationships with students, one thing to keep in mind is the difference between your “true self” and your “professional true self”. Participants expressed the importance of being “yourself” and being “authentic”, however, it’s important to remember that professional boundaries are important. For many of us, our “whole self” includes impatience, biases, frustrations, and unfiltered judgements. The role of a teacher is to guide, model, and inspire learning (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2025).

Lastly, the study reinforced that classroom management and relationship-building are not separate constructs but interconnected practices. Establishing warm, trusting, and supportive connections with students is a key component in creating a positive atmosphere enhancing classroom management and reducing behavioral issues (Thornberg et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021). Teachers noted that effective classroom management strategies such as clear procedures, consistent follow-through, and emotionally safe classroom environments enable relational trust

(Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Teachers should approach classroom management through a relational lens, recognizing that structure and connection work in tandem to promote positive behavior.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

Secondly, the findings of this study suggested that teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development must intentionally equip educators with the relational competencies necessary to support student behavior (Oliveira et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Raimundo et al., 2024). Research notes that teacher training programs that focus on relationship-building skills have been shown to not only improve the quality of teacher-student interactions but also decrease externalizing behaviors across classroom settings (Helker & Ray, 2009). While participants valued TSRs as foundational, they described relying on personal experience such as parenting or life experience rather than formal training to develop their relational skills.

First, teacher education programs should be more intentional as they prepare candidates to address student behavior through relational approaches. Coursework and field experiences should emphasize the connection between positive TSRs and behavioral outcomes, helping future teachers understand how emotional support, trust, and mutual respect influence classroom dynamics (Helker & Ray, 2009). Both Phoebe and Monica emphasized this as an essential piece of advice they would offer first-time teachers. Both indicated how this was something neither knew was of the utmost importance. Programs should incorporate training that strengthens interpersonal skills, cultural responsiveness, and teachers' capacity to connect with diverse learners.

Second, professional development should move beyond procedural behavior frameworks and include practical training in effective communication, conflict resolution, and emotional

responsiveness (Raimundo et al., 2024; Helker & Ray, 2009). Teachers understand the benefits of PBIS and CHAMPS but emphasized how these frameworks don't align with current classroom needs suggesting a perceived disconnect between institutional behavior frameworks and evolving behavioral needs of students. Professional learning opportunities should focus on building teachers' relational skills, including strategies for de-escalation, restorative conversations, and maintaining high expectations while demonstrating care.

Additionally, both teacher education and professional development initiatives should prioritize training that supports teachers in meeting students' social-emotional and behavioral needs (Oliveira et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Raimundo et al., 2024). Given the rising behavioral challenges described by participants, educators require structured guidance on integrating social-emotional learning principles, trauma-informed practices, and relationship-centered classroom management strategies into daily instruction. Teachers who are trained in social-emotional learning are said to be better equipped to support students' emotional development and respond to their social needs, which helps build more effective TSRs (Raimundo et al., 2024). Current research highlights that professional development programs that include social-emotional learning components have been shown to improve teacher confidence and lead to positive outcomes like enhanced emotional regulation, social competence, and psychological adjustment in students (Raimundo et al., 2024).

Overall, findings suggested that relationship-building should be positioned as a core element of teacher preparation and ongoing professional growth. By embedding relational competencies into both pre-service and in-service training, teacher education programs can better prepare educators to foster emotionally supportive, behaviorally responsive classroom environments.

Implications for School Administrators

Next, the findings of this study suggested several implications for school administrators, particularly in creating systems that support relationship-centered classroom practices. While teachers consistently emphasized the importance of positive teacher-student relationships, they also described some systemic inconsistencies and resource limitations that hindered their ability to sustain relational work. As such, administrators play a critical role in establishing the structural conditions necessary for relationship-building to occur (Robinson, 2022).

First, administrators should communicate and implement clear, consistent campus-wide discipline procedures. Across interviews, teachers described some frustration around shifting expectations, inconsistent referral systems, and unclear documentation processes. Establishing transparent behavior protocols can reduce some of this confusion, help increase teacher confidence, and promote equitable responses to student behavior (Robinson, 2022). Indeed, research notes that in schools where expectations around discipline and student support vary or are unclear, teachers may feel uncertain about how to respond to students' social-emotional needs which can lead to reactive or authoritarian management styles (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Thornberg et al., 2020). Clear systems and expectations not only support classroom management but also reinforce relational trust by ensuring that students experience predictable and fair consequences.

Second, administrators should consider allocating personnel or have a structured support to assist teachers with documentation and referral processes for students requiring additional services. Teachers described the emotional and procedural burden of extensive paperwork and prolonged referral timelines which only takes away from instructional time and could potentially lead to teacher burnout. Current research emphasizes that the demands of teaching, emotional

labor, and behavioral management can lead to fatigue, frustration and emotional withdrawal. Teachers experiencing high levels of stress may unintentionally project negativity or become less emotionally available to students, making it more difficult to sustain supportive relationships (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). Assigning support staff to assist with documentation and coordination of services could help reduce teacher burnout and allow educators to focus more fully on instruction and relational practices.

Lastly, administrators should actively encourage and facilitate relationship-building with families. Teachers in this study emphasized the importance of parent partnerships as essential in reinforcing behavioral expectations and supporting student growth. Campus administrators can strengthen this effort by serving as liaisons between families and staff, hosting community events, and creating structured opportunities for positive family engagement beyond disciplinary interactions. One teacher shared the home visit expectations her campus has implemented, and she noted that it encouraged relationship-focused communication with parents that helped foster greater alignment between home and school expectations.

Overall, the findings suggested that campus administrators must move beyond viewing relationship-building as solely the responsibility of individual teachers. Instead, they should cultivate campus-wide systems, supports, and community partnerships that enable teachers to sustain meaningful teacher-student relationships while effectively addressing behavioral and emotional needs.

Implications for Theory

Lastly, the findings of this study offered several important implications for theory. While existing literature often positions TSRs as influencing student outcomes, the results of this study suggested that these relationships operate in a more dynamic and reciprocal manner.

First, the findings indicated that classroom management and teacher-student relationships functioned as bi-directional processes rather than independent constructs. Across interviews, teachers described how positive relationships improved classroom management, while consistent routines, clear expectations, and structured environments simultaneously strengthened relational trust. This suggested that classroom management was not merely an outcome of positive relationships, but also a procedure through which those relationships are built and sustained. Indeed, research showed that fostering positive relationships contributed to a more supportive and conducive learning environment which enhanced classroom management, however, in order to create this positive atmosphere a teacher needs to establish warm, trusting, and supportive connections with students (Thornberg et al., 2020). Additionally, research noted that the reciprocal influence between TSRs and student behavior played a critical role in effective classroom dynamics. Positive teacher perceptions of behavior can actively shape the classroom environment and align with principles of proactive classroom management which emphasizes cultivating an inclusive climate where students feel valued and understood (Chen et al., 2021).

Consistent with this body of research, the findings of the present study also suggested a reciprocal relationship between TSRs and student behavior. Quantitative findings demonstrated that teachers believe positive relationships reduced disruptive behavior and increased engagement. Qualitative findings further revealed that improved student behavior also reinforced relational trust, respect, and emotional responsiveness. Relationships shaped behavior and behavior, in turn, shaped relationships which aligns to current literature review. The influence of TSRs is bidirectional, student behavior affects the teacher-student dynamic, and the quality of that relationship, in turn, shapes future behavioral outcomes (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Thornberg et al., 2020).

This finding also aligns with research emphasizing the importance of incorporating the student perspective when examining TSRs. Prior studies indicated that students report greater engagement and behavioral investment when classrooms are perceived as supportive, welcoming, and emotionally safe environments (Arthur & Hannah, 2015; Thornberg et al., 2020). Students have described effective classrooms as those where teachers are supportive, friendly, calm, and respectful, and where relationships are built on trust, care, and mutual respect. These conditions foster students' willingness to participate, follow expectations, and remain engaged in the learning process (Arthur & Hannah, 2015; Egeberg & McConney, 2017; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Yu et al., 2018).

These findings are also consistent with the principles of attachment theory. Attachment theory suggests that supportive relationships with caregivers and other significant adults serve as a secure base that allows children to explore their environment and regulate their emotions and behavior (Bretherton, 1992; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Within educational settings, teachers can function as attachment figures who provide emotional security and stability for students. When students experience relational trust and support from their teachers, they are more likely to demonstrate improved behavioral regulation, increased engagement, and more classroom participation (Chen et al., 2021; Raimundo et al., 2024; Robinson, 2022). Conversely, behavioral disruptions may strain relational dynamics, illustrating the cyclical and mutually influential nature of teacher-student relationships (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). Taken together, these findings reinforce theoretical perspectives suggesting that TSRs should not be viewed as static or one-directional influences. Instead, they function as dynamic, evolving processes in which relational quality and student behavior continuously interact to shape classroom experiences.

Finally, the findings have implications for further refinement of future measurement models. The original purpose of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) was to measure a teacher's perception of his or her relationship with a particular student (Pianta, 1992). It measured student-teacher relationships patterns in terms of conflict, closeness, and dependency as well as overall quality of the relationship. The development of the STRS was prompted by interests in a teachers' own emotional and social experiences with children in their classrooms, the applications of attachment theory in school settings, and the contribution of relationships with adults to students' academic and social competence (Pianta, 1992). The tool was primarily used as a tool for assessing student-teacher relationships in the context of efforts to prevent or to intervene early in the course of development of adjustment problems in school. It was used primarily for students in preschool through Grade 3 (Pianta, 1992). Because the focus of the present study was to examine elementary teachers' broader perceptions of how TSRs influence classroom behavior, rather than teachers' relationships with a single student, the STRS items were adapted to reflect teachers' general experiences across their classrooms.

Participants described the increased complexity of student behavioral needs which suggests that instruments may require refinement to better capture relational dynamics within today's educational context. Future theoretical and measurement models should consider incorporating dimensions such as student agency and rising behavioral challenges that was identified in this study. While Pianta's (1992) tool focused on constructs such as closeness, conflict, and dependency, the findings from this study suggest that contemporary relational practices also include elements such as collaborative problem-solving with students, culturally responsive engagement, and intentional strategies for fostering student voice and belonging.

Expanding existing measurement tools to reflect these evolving relational dynamics may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how TSRs function within modern classrooms.

Recommendations for Research

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for future research were identified. While this study provided insight into elementary teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and student behavior, additional research is needed to further expand understanding across grade levels, contexts, and methodological approaches.

Early Childhood Perspectives & Expanding Participant Scope

Future research should expand the scope of participants to include both a larger and more diverse sample of teachers, particularly those working in early childhood settings. The research study originally planned to interview at least three teachers that taught PreK-2nd grade, however, the only teachers who volunteered for a follow-up interview taught 4th and 5th grade.

Existing literature emphasizes that early childhood settings lay the foundation for long-term behavioral engagement, relational development, and academic adjustment (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Studies also suggest that students who develop early TSRs are more likely to maintain prosocial behavior, avoid school disciplinary systems, and demonstrate resilience in future educational settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Examining how relationship-building practices are established in PreK-2nd grade may provide deeper insight into how early relational experiences shape later student behavior and classroom engagement. Furthermore, the need to include early childhood educators in future research aligns with the key principles of attachment theory. One key principle states the importance of early relationships which help shape emotional, social, and behavioral development across the lifespan and help explain the significance of secure, supportive TSRs in educational contexts (Bretherton, 1992).

Additionally, expanding participant samples across grade levels and demographic contexts would strengthen the generalizability of findings. The small sample size in this research study limited the types of statistical analysis that could be conducted and restricted the ability to draw broader conclusions. Future studies with larger and more diverse samples would allow researchers to conduct more robust quantitative analyses and examine potential differences in teacher perceptions across educational contexts.

Longitudinal Research on Teacher-Student Relationships

Longitudinal studies are recommended to better understand how teacher-student relationships develop and influence behavioral outcomes over time. Past longitudinal studies suggest that students who develop early TSRs are more likely to maintain prosocial behavior, avoid school disciplinary systems, and demonstrate resilience in future educational settings (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Because relationships are built gradually and evolve across school years, longitudinal designs would allow researchers to examine how early relational experience impacts students' long-term behavioral regulation, academic motivation, and school connectedness.

Indeed, Phoebe, the art teacher in this study, noted that building relationships with her students is time consuming and emphasized that relationships develop with each school year. As the only teacher in the study who interacted with the same students each year, Phoebe described how sustained interactions allowed relationships to deepen over time. Longitudinal research would allow educators to capture not only a snapshot of relational dynamics but also a more comprehensive understanding of how relationships develop across time. Such research could incorporate both teacher and student perspectives, providing insight into how each perceives and experiences the relationship and how these perceptions influence relationship-building and

behavioral outcomes. The student perspective is an important but often overlooked dimension of research. Students' thoughts and feelings about school and learning are important because these perspectives often reveal information that is missed by more traditional empirical studies, which rely mainly on information provided by adults (Gentilucci & Muto, 2007).

Additionally, Thornberg & colleagues' (2020) research states that positive, warm, and supportive teacher-student relationships are essential and align with the principles of attachment theory, which suggest that secure relationships can foster better emotional and behavioral outcomes and longitudinal studies would help identify whether sustained relational practices produce cumulative benefits for students. According to Reynolds & colleagues (2014), the use of longitudinal data and a repeated measure in studies is still relatively rare but has gained some traction.

Comparative Studies Across School Contexts

Future research should explore how teacher-student relationships function across different school contexts, particularly in urban and rural settings. Current literature points to a deficit view of teachers and teaching in rural contexts. Teachers in rural communities are described as professionally isolated and distant from resources, and inflexible and resistant to change (Burton, Brown, and Johson, 2013). Additionally, rural schools face unique challenges such as teacher shortages, demographic poverty, serving students with disabilities, transportation difficulties, and funding considerations (Diorio, 2021). Research indicates that urban schools tend to have much larger proportions of minority students, higher poverty rates, and lower achievement than do suburban schools (Orfield and Lee, 2005; Logan, Minca, and Adar, 2012). Teachers in urban schools also face their own set of challenges, including a high turnover rate (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and a more demanding work environment (Shann,

1998). Although both school contexts differ in size and population, they each have disparities that affect teachers, staff, and students. Environmental factors such as school resources, class sizes, community involvement, and access to behavioral supports may shape how relationships are built and maintained. Examining TSRs across rural and urban contexts could provide deeper insight into how environmental and systemic factors influence relational practices and classroom behavior.

However, although both school contexts face disparities that may affect relationship-building, there are also benefits to both rural and urban communities. Varghese and colleagues (2019) emphasize an important benefit to teachers in rural communities by stating that they have more teaching experience than teachers in more urban communities and they are more likely to live in the communities where they teach. This proximity and longevity within the community can strengthen TSRs by allowing educators to develop deeper connections with students and their families, better understand community values and cultural contexts, and build trust beyond the classroom. Another notable benefit is the class size. Rural classrooms often offer students something that urban schools cannot: smaller class sizes. In rural schools, class size may be in the single digits where teachers are able to monitor each student's progress and provide any individualized instruction needed (Diorio, 2021). As a result, these conditions may create opportunities for relational ties and increased collaboration between schools and families.

Urban schools hold a unique place in educational landscape, marked by both their challenges and their potential for innovation (Abdul-Jabbar & Krushan, 2015). One of the unique aspects of urban schools is the diversity and dynamism of their student populations. This diversity can help enrich the educational environment by exposing students to a wider range of cultural perspectives and experiences, which may foster greater cultural awareness, empathy, and

social understanding among students and teachers (Shen et al., 2003). Additionally, diverse teaching staffs and student populations can create opportunities for culturally responsive teaching practices and more meaningful teacher-student connections. As hubs of diversity, innovation, and community engagement, urban schools can provide fertile environments for developing inclusive educational practices and relational approaches that support student engagement and behavior (Zheng et al., 2024).

Comparative research across these settings may help identify context-specific challenges and strategies that support relationship-building in diverse school environments.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

The first limitation of the study relates to the small quantitative sample size. Although 40 participants initially opened and began the survey, only 14 participants completed it in its entirety. This reduced sample limited the statistical analyses that could be conducted. The original research design intended to include inferential statistical procedures, such as ANOVA, to examine differences across demographic groups. However, due to the small number of completed responses, the analysis was restricted to descriptive statistics.

The second limitation emerged within the qualitative sample. The study initially aimed to interview six teachers, with purposeful representation across grade levels (three teachers from PreK-2nd grade and three from 3rd-5th grade). However, only three teachers ultimately participated, where 2 of the 3 teachers taught upper elementary grades (4th and 5th grade) and the third taught Art class across all grade levels. This limited the developmental range of perspectives captured in the qualitative findings. Research suggests that positive relationships established in early childhood can yield long-term benefits, supporting academic achievement,

social competence, and resilience, particularly for students considered at risk (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Baker, 2006). The absence of primary-grade teacher perspectives may limit the transferability of findings across all elementary levels.

The third limitation to consider, most participants expressed strong agreement regarding the benefits of teacher-student relationships. One participant who reported more critical views consented to a follow-up interview; however, despite multiple outreach attempts, the participant did not respond. As a result, potentially contrasting perspectives on relationship-building were not explored in depth.

Finally, data collection constraints limited access to participants. Due to professional conflicts of interest associated with my current role and employment within a regional education service center that supports local school districts, I was unable to directly recruit participants from districts within the service region. Prior to distributing the survey through social media platforms and teacher organizations, formal permission was pursued from several school districts to conduct the study but instead received denials. Consequently, the participant pool relied on voluntary participation through broader professional networks and social media only.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine how elementary teachers perceived the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior and to better understand the motivations, practices, and challenges associated with relationship-building in classroom settings. Through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study integrated survey data and teacher interviews that provided a comprehensive understanding of how teachers experienced and enacted relational practices in their daily work with students.

By centering teachers' perspectives, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how teacher-student relationships functioned within the realities of contemporary classrooms. The findings reinforced existing research that positions relational trust and emotional support as critical factors of effective teaching while also highlighting the need for institutional structures that support teachers' relational work.

Ultimately, positive teacher-student relationships remain one of the most powerful tools educators possess for supporting student behavior, fostering engagement, and cultivating inclusive learning environments. As schools continue to address increasingly complex academic and behavioral needs, prioritizing relational practices and providing teachers with the necessary support to sustain them will remain essential for promoting student success.

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Appendix A - Research Consent Form

9/8/25, 7:33 PM

Qualtrics Survey Software

information provided below.

Consent Statement

I have read the information above and received a copy of this form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions regarding my participation in this study. By signing below, I consent to participate in this research.

Participant Agreement

- ☐ I agree to participate in the survey and give my consent for the researcher to use my results in the research study.
- ☐ I do not agree to participate in the survey and do not give my consent.

Consent to be audio recorded (if you choose to participate in the follow-up interview)

- ☐ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded
- ☐ No, I do not agree to be audio recorded
- ☐ I do not wish to participate in the follow-up interview

Appendix B - Research Participant Recruitment Flyer

CALLING ALL ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

Research Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Ramirez, doctorate student for the Ed.D. program in Curriculum & Instruction at Kansas State University.

The research study seeks to examine:

- Elementary school teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships on student behavior.
- How teachers understand, implement, and evaluate relationship-building strategies in their classrooms.
- How these relationships influence student behavioral outcomes.

Looking for:

- Any and all elementary teachers
 - PreK-5th grade
 - Texas Educator

Expectations:

If you agree to participate, it will include the following:

- Complete Online Survey that will take approximately 10-15 minutes.
- A reflection on teaching practices that will take approximately 20-30 minutes.
- An optional follow-up interview that will take approximately 45 minutes.



[Survey Link](#)

K-STATE



Please contact me if you have any questions

Contact Information:
Jennifer Ramirez, Ed.D. Student
jenniferramirez90@ksu.edu

Committee Chair Contact Information:
Michael Lawson, Ph.D
mlawson1@ksu.edu

Appendix C - Student-Teacher Relationship Scale Form



Student-Teacher Relationship Scale™ Response Form

Teacher's name _____ Gender: M F Ethnicity _____ Date ____/____/____

Child's name _____ Grade _____ Gender: M F Ethnicity _____ Age _____

Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your relationship with this child. Using the point scale below, CIRCLE the appropriate number for each item. If you need to change your answer, DO NOT ERASE! Make an X through the incorrect answer and circle the correct answer.

1 Definitely does not apply	2 Does not really apply	3 Neutral, not sure	4 Applies somewhat	5 Definitely applies
1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.	2	3	4	5
2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.	2	3	4	5
3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.	2	3	4	5
4. This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.	2	3	4	5
5. This child values his/her relationship with me.	2	3	4	5
6. This child appears hurt or embarrassed when I correct him/her.	2	3	4	5
7. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.	2	3	4	5
8. This child reacts strongly to separation from me.	2	3	4	5
9. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.	2	3	4	5
10. This child is overly dependent on me.	2	3	4	5
11. This child easily becomes angry with me.	2	3	4	5
12. This child tries to please me.	2	3	4	5
13. This child feels that I treat him/her unfairly.	2	3	4	5
14. This child asks for my help when he/she really does not need help.	2	3	4	5
15. It is easy to be in tune with what this child is feeling.	2	3	4	5
16. This child sees me as a source of punishment and criticism.	2	3	4	5
17. This child expresses hurt or jealousy when I spend time with other children.	2	3	4	5
18. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.	2	3	4	5
19. When this child is misbehaving, he/she responds well to my look or tone of voice.	2	3	4	5
20. Dealing with this child drains my energy.	2	3	4	5
21. I've noticed this child copying my behavior or ways of doing things.	2	3	4	5
22. When this child is in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day.	2	3	4	5
23. This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.	2	3	4	5
24. Despite my best efforts, I'm uncomfortable with how this child and I get along.	2	3	4	5
25. This child whines or cries when he/she wants something from me.	2	3	4	5
26. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.	2	3	4	5
27. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.	2	3	4	5
28. My interactions with this child make me feel effective and confident.	2	3	4	5

Appendix D - Adapted Survey for Quantitative Phase

9/8/25, 7:33 PM

Qualtrics Survey Software



Default Question Block

Purpose of the Research

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jennifer Ramirez, doctorate student for the Ed.D program in Curriculum & Instruction at Kansas State University. The study seeks to examine elementary school teachers' perceptions of the impact of positive TSRs on student behavior. The study aims to explore how teachers understand, implement, and evaluate relationship-building strategies in their classrooms and how these relationships influence student behavioral outcomes.

Procedures

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to decline or withdraw your consent at any time. If you choose

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to withdraw from the study, your decision will be respected.

If you agree to participate, you will be involved in the following:

- Complete an online survey. This will take approximately 10-15 minutes.
- There will be an option at the end of the survey to further participate in the study. Further participation would include a reflection on a previous lesson and a follow-up interview. A sample of interview volunteers will be selected and a 30- 45 minute interview will be set up at a time convenient with your schedule.

All data is intended to be collected during the academic semester, and your participation will take place during the fall semester of 2025.

Interview Audio/Video Recording

With your permission, an audio/video recording of the interview will be collected to ensure accuracy. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings, which will be stored securely and deleted one year after the study is concluded. You may still participate in the interview if you

decline to be recorded, in that case, the researcher will take detailed notes instead.

Risks

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study, however, some prompts or discussions may lead to emotional reflection on your personal experiences with teaching and your perspective on teacher-student relationships. You may choose to pause or withdraw from participation at any time if you feel discomfort.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits, however, your participation could:

- Contribute to research that aims to improve understanding of how positive teacher-student relationships impact student behavior, which may ultimately benefit broader educational practice and policy.
- Give you, the participant, an opportunity to share your experience and perspective ensuring that teacher insights are included in research focused on classroom management and relational pedagogy.

- Contribute knowledge and insight that could support future professional development and pre-service teacher education.

Participant Confidentiality

Your privacy will be respected throughout this study. All data, including survey data, interview transcripts and reflections, will be anonymized by assigning each participant a pseudonym. Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside of the dissertation committee. All data will be securely stored on password-protected devices and the study's final report or publication will not include your name or any identifying information (e.g., district, state).

Refusal to Sign Consent

You have the right to decline to participate in this study.

Canceling this Consent

You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. To do so, contact the researcher using the

information provided below.

Consent Statement

I have read the information above and received a copy of this form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions regarding my participation in this study. By signing below, I consent to participate in this research.

Participant Agreement

- ☐ I agree to participate in the survey and give my consent for the researcher to use my results in the research study.
- ☐ I do not agree to participate in the survey and do not give my consent.

Consent to be audio recorded (if you choose to participate in the follow-up interview)

- ☐ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded
- ☐ No, I do not agree to be audio recorded
- ☐ I do not wish to participate in the follow-up interview

Consent to be video recorded (if you choose to participate in the follow-up interview)

- ☐ Yes, I agree to be video recorded
- ☐ No, I do not agree to be video recorded
- ☐ I do not wish to participate in the follow-up interview

Block 1

Section 1: Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior

When it comes to your perceptions of teacher-student relationships on student behavior, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree with it.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Positive teacher-student relationships reduce disruptive behavior in my classroom.	☒				
When I have a good relationship with a student, they are more engaged in lessons.	☒				
Positive teacher-student relationships improve the overall classroom environment.	☒				
Building strong relationships with students increases their motivation to follow classroom rules.	☒				

Strongly
Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Neutral (3) Agree (4) Strongly
Agree (5)

Positive teacher-
student
relationships
help reduce
behavioral
problems over
time.



Block 2

Section 2: Importance of Relationship-Building Strategies

When it comes to relationship-building strategies, how do you rate the importance of each strategy?

Not Slightly Moderately Very Extremely
Important Important Important Important Important
(1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

Showing
empathy toward
students is
important for
managing
behavior.



Providing
consistent
communication
with students
helps maintain
positive
behavior.



Offering verbal
encouragement
increases
student
motivation.



Incorporating
students' cultural
backgrounds
and interests
improves
engagement.



Not Slightly Moderately Very Extremely
 Important Important Important Important Important
 (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

Being fair and
 respectful builds
 student trust
 and reduces
 behavior
 problems.



Block 3

Section 3: Frequency of Use of Strategies

How often do you use these strategies to help build
 relationships with your students?

Never Rarely Sometimes Often Always
 (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

I check in on
 students' well-
 being during the
 school day.



	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	
I use praise to reinforce positive behavior.	☒					
I involve students in classroom decision-making.		☒				
I adapt lesson plans based on student interests or cultural backgrounds.			☒			
I make an effort to repair relationships after conflict with a student.				☒		

Block 4

Section 4: Motivations for Building Relationships

When it comes to your motivations for building relationships with students, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree with it.

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
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I build
relationships
with students
because I care
about their long-
term success.

I build
relationships
because my
school expects
me to maintain
classroom order.

My personal
teaching
philosophy
prioritizes strong
relationships
with students.

Strongly
disagree (1) Disagree (2) Neutral (3) Agree (4) Strongly
agree (5)

Building positive
teacher-student
relationships helps meet
school behavior
expectations.

My motivation to
build teacher-
student
relationships comes from
seeing how it
improves the
classroom
climate.

Block 5

Section 5: Challenges and Barriers

When it comes to the challenges and barriers you face as you build relationships with your students, please read each statement and decide if you strongly disagree, disagree,

are neutral, agree, or strongly agree with it.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
Large class sizes makes it difficult to build strong relationships with all students.	☐				
Time constraints limit my ability to focus on relationship-building.	☐				
I feel supported by my school to develop strong teacher-student relationships.	☐				
I need more training in how to build and maintain teacher-student relationships effectively.	☐				

Strongly
disagree (1) Disagree (2) Neutral (3) Agree (4) Strongly
agree (5)

Systemic or
school-wide
pressures (like
testing) reduce
the time I can
spend on
relationship-
building.



Block 6

Section 6: Teacher Demographics

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / third gender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your age range?

- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60+

What is your race/ethnicity?

- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How many years of teaching experience do you have?

- ☐ 0-4 years
- ☐ 5-9 years
- ☐ 10-14 years
- ☐ 15-19 years

☐ 20+ years

What grade level(s) do you currently teach?

- ☐ PreKindergarten
- ☐ Kindergarten
- ☐ 1st Grade
- ☐ 2nd Grade
- ☐ 3rd Grade
- ☐ 4th Grade
- ☐ 5th Grade

Block 7

Do you wish to further participate in the research study?

- ☐ Yes, I am interested in filling out the reflection only.
- ☐ Yes, I am interested in filling out the reflection and participating in the follow-up interview.
- ☐ Yes, I am interested in participating in the follow-up interview only.
- ☐ No, thank you.

Block 8

Thank you for your willingness to further participate in the research study. I will be in touch soon to schedule a time for the interview.

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Appendix E - Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi- Structured Interview Protocol

Interview intro. script:

Hello! My name is Jennifer Ramirez. I'm a doctoral student in the Ed.D program in Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this conversation is to explore your experiences, motivations, and perceptions about building positive relationships with your students and how you see those relationships affecting classroom behavior. Your insights will help us better understand the teacher perspective, especially related to the findings from the earlier survey phase. Please know there are no right or wrong answers, I am interested in your honest thoughts and experiences. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes and will be audio-recorded with your consent.

Background:

- Tell me your favorite thing about teaching.
- How long have you been teaching?
- What's it like teaching in your school?
- Tell me about current policies that are impacting teachers right now.

Section 1: Motivations for Building Relationships

- Can you describe what personally drives you to build relationships with your students, and how that motivation has evolved over time?
- Can you share an example of a time when you felt your relationship with a student made a meaningful difference in their behavior or learning?
- How do your personal values or teaching philosophy influence the way you prioritize relationship-building in your classroom?

Section 2: Perceived Impact on Behavior and Management

- In your experience, what kinds of behavioral or classroom shifts do you notice when your relationships with students are particularly strong?
- Can you describe a situation where a stronger teacher-student relationship helped prevent or de-escalate a behavioral issue?
- Are there particular strategies you use that you feel help prevent or reduce behavioral issues? What specific strategies have you found most effective in shaping behavior and maintaining a positive classroom climate?

Section 3: Challenges and Barriers

- What has been the most difficult challenge you've faced in trying to build strong relationships with students, and how did you navigate it?
- How do you approach building relationships with students who may be resistant or display challenging behaviors?
- Can you share an example of how systemic factors, such as testing pressures, class size, or limited time have influenced your ability to focus on relationships?

Section 4: Strategies and Practices

- What specific strategies or practices do you use to build or strengthen relationships with your students?
- How do you adapt your strategies for students from different cultural, linguistic, or personal backgrounds?
- Have you participated in any professional development or training related to relationship-building? If so, how has that influenced your practice?

Section 5: Reflection and Advice

- Looking back, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career about building relationships with students?
- What advice would you give to a new teacher who wants to build strong relationships with their students?

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and insights today. Is there anything else you would like to add that you think is important for me to understand about teacher-student relationships and classroom behavior?

Appendix F - IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Michael Lawson
Curriculum and Instruction

Proposal Number IRB-13222

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 10/10/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Title of Research: The Impact of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Behavior: An Explanatory Mixed-Methods Study."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 10/10/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 10/09/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.