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Middle School Student Perceptions of Teacher and Adult Caring Behaviors

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Abstract

This research explores student perceptions of teacher and adult caring behaviors. It seeks to determine the extent that middle school students feel cared for by teachers and other adults in school and to identify specific student perceived adult caring and non-caring behaviors. Research methods include the creation and administration of a three-question survey administered to school students (grades 7and 8) who attend an upper Midwestern middle school. Survey results are interpreted referencing attachment and self-systems theory. Research findings suggest that teachers must focus on and address both academic and personal needs to create meaningful teacher-student relationships that are perceived by students as caring.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Every three years the Minnesota Student Survey (MN Student Survey Results, 2010) is administered to students in grades 6, 9, and 12. The survey, developed by the Minnesota Department of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety, asks students 127 questions about their activities, opinions, behaviors, and experiences. The Minnesota Student Survey is used to identify problems that Minnesota youth face, to assist districts and communities to monitor the effectiveness of preventative initiatives, and to aid districts and communities to make decisions regarding young peoples' needs (MN Student Survey Results, 2010).

The school district involved in this study (hereafter referred to as Upper Midwest District) has participated in the survey since the administration of the survey in Minnesota in 1992. The district is one of the 88 percent of all public schools in the state that participates in the survey (MN Student Survey Results, 2010). One of the district's uses for the survey is to assess its progress on one school improvement initiative, Direction E: "Raising achievement for all students and closing the gap for all students" (Strategic Roadmap, 2008). The Upper Midwest District has selected Minnesota Student Survey question 48 to measure this initiative. Minnesota Student Survey question number 48 reads, "How much do you feel teachers/other adults at school care about you?" In response to the question, students choose from: *not at all, some, a little, quite a bit, or very much.* This question is a useful indicator for initiative E because caring teacher-student relationships are

linked positively with student academic success (Roorda et al., 2011; Wentzel, 1997; Allen, et al., 2011).

In 2010, 62% of 6th graders, 57% of 9th graders, and 41% of 12th graders in the Upper Midwest District reported that teachers/other adults at school cared for them *quite a bit or very much* (MN Student Survey Results, 2010). Although these numbers represent an increase from previous years, they are perceived as a cause for concern as a growing body of research is in support of positive teacher-student relationships (Hughes, 2010; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Teven, 2001). Positive teacher-student relationships are linked to increases in student academic achievement, student engagement, and acceptance by peers (Hughes, 2011). The research suggests that such relationships affect students and teachers alike as positive student-teacher relationships have been found to lead to an increase in teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Also, positive teacher-student relationships are often described as the prominent reason that many teachers pursue a career in education (Alder, 2002).

Statement of Problem

In a statement developed by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) entitled *This we believe*, effective middle schools are described as inviting, safe, inclusive, supportive, and guided by adult advocates (NMSA, 2010). The language used in the statement emphasizes that NMSA's middle school instructional philosophy is rooted in healthy interpersonal and societal relationships. Because of this emphasis on relationships and research-based benefits of them, the author

hypothesizes that it is beneficial for all middle schools to develop a means to measure their success in cultivating an environment that nurtures positive teacher-student relationships.

In 2011, a middle school within Upper Midwest District (middle school hereafter referred to as Upper Midwest Middle School or UMMS) identified the percentage of students who perceived themselves to have caring teacher-student relationships as a key performance indicator for its revised school vision. The Minnesota Student Survey, although useful at the district level, is not an effective means of measuring this key performance indicator for the following reasons:

1. The survey is administered every three years to students in grades 6, 9, and 12 and thus, skips over students in grade 7-8 configured middle schools.
2. The survey data are not disaggregated into individual schools, and because of this, questions arise as to how appropriate the data are in making cite specific instructional decisions.
3. In terms of focusing on an individual's perception of caring teacher-student relationships, the question is broad and lacks specificity. The lack of data in this area makes it difficult for UMMS to determine its present status in relation to the goal of reaching its newly formed vision and to identify areas of strength and needed improvement.

This research initiative will involve the creation and administration of a three-question survey to the middle school students (grades 7and 8) who attend UMMS, and analyze the results for the purpose of providing data specific to UMMS.

The first question on the survey mimics the Minnesota Student Survey asks, "'How much do you feel teachers/other adults at school care about you?'" The second and third questions ask students to provide short, hand written responses that describe adult behaviors that lead them to perceive that they are cared for and adult behaviors that lead them to perceive that they are not cared for. Results from the survey will be used to answer the following research questions:

1. What percentage of the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School perceive teachers/other adults at school to care for them "*quite a bit, or very much"?*

2. What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive that they are cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

3. What are the most five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive they are not cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

Importance of the study

The purpose of this research is twofold. The first purpose is to provide the leadership and staff of Upper Midwest Middle School with appropriate and timely data to measure grade 7 and 8 student perceptions of being cared for at school by teachers or other adults. These data will be presented as a percentage of students who feel cared for "*a lot or quite a bit*" as compared to students who feel cared for "*a*

little or not at all." Data will be collected annually and used to compare to the existing state and district Minnesota Student Survey results. Doing so will aid UMMS in monitoring its progress towards reaching its vision of increasing teacher-student relationships.

Simply knowing the percentage of students who do and do not perceive to be cared for does not produce change in instructional habits. To produce change, leadership and staff must be informed of specifically what behaviors students perceive to convey 'caring' and 'non- caring' (Alder, 2002). With this in mind, the second purpose of the study is to identify specific behaviors grade 7 and 8 students at UMMS perceive to be caring behaviors and non-caring behaviors. Once identified, the UMMS leadership and staff will address the need to increase the behaviors that are perceived to be caring, and conversely, decrease those perceived as non-caring. Ultimately, data received through this study will be used to monitor its achievement of the goals set forth by its revised vision.

Methods

Demographically, Upper Midwest Middle School has approximately 580 students in grades 7 and 8, of which 88% are Caucasian, 5% Black, and 4% Hispanic, with 32% of the total population qualifying for free and reduced lunch (FRP). UMMS's student population consists of 14% SPED and 1.9% of ELL students. UMMS is one of two middle schools in a large, upper Midwest school district with approximately 7,600 students in kindergarten through 12th grade (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012).

The survey developed for the research includes three questions. The first question was taken directly from question 48 of the 2010 Minnesota Student Survey. The researcher designed the remaining two questions. All surveys were completed anonymously. The survey includes questions related to student perception of being cared for by teachers and other adults at school. Because the study focuses on identifying what students perceive to be adult caring and non-caring behaviors, no attempt was made to define the word "care."

As per Institutional Review Board regulations, parental/guardian consent was required for a student to participate in the survey. Consent forms were distributed to students by their homeroom advisor two weeks prior to the administration of the survey. Students who wished to participate in the survey were given the responsibility to return the signed form to their homeroom advisor prior to the survey date. Placing the responsibility of returning signed forms on the students is standard practice at this middle school.

A total of 153 students completed the three-question survey on the same day in May 2012. Individual homeroom advisers administered the survey to their homeroom advisees in the regular homeroom setting. Prior to beginning the survey, students signed an assent form. To ensure uniformity in directions, all advisors read the assent form out loud to students prior to the survey's administration. The beginning of the survey asked students to identify two demographic factors, gender and grade level. Demographic information will be used to disaggregate data into subgroups.

The first survey question, which was taken directly from the Minnesota Student Survey, asked students to what extent they perceived teachers/other adults at school care for them. Students indicated their perceived level of care from teachers/other adults by selecting one of five options. The format and wording of the original question were used so that the results could be compared to state results at the end of the data gathering process. (Minnesota Student Survey Results, 2010). The format is as follows:

"How much do you feel teachers/other adults at school care for you?

☐ Not at all ☐ A little ☐ ☐ Some ☐ Quite a bit
Very much

The second survey question asked students to "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they care about you." Similarly, the third and final survey question asked students to "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they do not care about you." Students responded to these questions by writing their answers in the blank space provided on the survey. Students were given as much time to complete the survey as needed. The majority of students finished within ten minutes. Students who did not choose to participate or who did not return a signed consent form read a book silently while the participants completed the survey.

The results from question number one were tabulated and presented as percentage of students who responded with each of the five answer choices. The data were disaggregated by sex and grade level. The resulting data were compared to the 2010 district results for question 48 of the Minnesota Student Survey; UMMS

does not have any baseline data to use for comparison. The lack of baseline data is a result of this being first year of the three-question survey at UMMS. Annual administration of the survey will provide UMMS with longitudinal data for comparison in the future.

Student responses to questions number two and three were categorized by the researcher. A final tally was taken, and a list of the five most frequently noted teacher/adult caring behaviors and the most frequently noted teacher/adult non-caring behaviors was created. These lists will provide the staff at UMMS with specific examples of adult behaviors that are perceived by students as being caring and non-caring. With the perspective gained from these examples, leadership and staff will work to increase the behaviors perceived as caring and decrease those perceived as non-caring.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this research. The first limitation is the survey sample. The entire student population of UMMS will have the opportunity to participate, however, due to regulations and the survey's voluntary nature, only those who return signed consent forms will be able to participate in the study. It is not known nor can it be assumed how those who do not participate would answer the three survey questions and therefore, the data collected could be skewed (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

The second limitation of the research is the limited disaggregation of data. The current survey will disaggregate data by two demographics, grade level and

gender. This limited disaggregation will not lend itself to identify possible correlations between other demographics such as race or socioeconomic status. If UMMS chooses to continue this research in the future, it could benefit from disaggregating the data further to identify other patterns or correlations.

This research will be conducted at one middle school in one district in the Upper Midwestern United States. Due to this fact, generalizations should be used with caution.

Definition of Terms

Minnesota Student Survey

The Minnesota Student Survey is a survey given every three years to students in grades 6, 9, and 12. The survey, developed by Minnesota schools and four other state agencies – the Minnesota Department of Education, Health, Human Services, and Public Safety, asks students a number of questions about their activities, opinions, behaviors and experiences. The survey is used to identify problems that Minnesota youth face, assist districts and communities in monitoring the effectiveness of preventative initiatives, and to aid districts and communities in making decisions regarding young peoples' needs (MN Student Survey Results, 2010).

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The signing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 is associated with the beginning of a new era in education. This new era, which is often referred to as the age of accountability, has placed extra pressure on schools to document improvement in student achievement scores (Schraw, 2011). In response, schools spend a great deal of time, energy, and resources on the collection and analysis of student achievement data and on the implementation of new efforts aimed at increasing student achievement. Teachers naturally become focused on test scores and take what Wiggins and McTighe (2007) describe as a "coverage" approach to teaching. With a coverage approach, teachers superficially rush through curriculum in an attempt to cover all material that will be on the No Child Left Behind accountability examinations. With this approach, many teachers allow examination timelines to dictate the pace of lessons instead of the responding to student understanding. This instructional approach may ensure that the content is covered, but it does little to ensure that content is mastered by all students.

Pushing through material without regard to student understanding can erode relationships between teachers and students. "Feeling pressured to produce higher test scores, teachers become more controlling and less patient, particularly with students who lag behind" (Stipek, 2006, p. 46). Any decrease in positive teacher-student relationships is reason for concern as it is detrimental to the overall goal of increasing student achievement (Hughes, 2011; Wentzel, 1997; Murdock and Miller, 2003). A large body of research backs this claim by showing teacher-student

relationships (TSRs) to be one of the most important factors for related to improvement of student achievement (Stipek, 2006).

Research has linked TSRs to student motivation, peer acceptance, academic achievement, and connectedness with school (Hughes, 2011; Wentzel, 1997; Murdock & Miller, 2003). In one experimental study that focused on the effect of TSRs on academic achievement, improvement in TSRs accounted for an average increase in student achievement of nine percentile points on an end of the unit exam (Allen et al., 2011). In another, TSRs showed a moderate correlation with student emotional quality (.42), social skills (.47), and student engagement (.42) (Decker, Dona, & Christianson, 2007). The literature not only supports the creation of caring relationships for the benefit of the student, but also for the benefit of teachers (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). These findings suggest that schools that strive to meet the increasing demands placed on them by No Child Left Behind would benefit by study of their current level of TSRs and to accordingly focus their improvement efforts on them. How important are positive TSRs in student academic success? Teven (2001) states, “In order to maximize learning, it is essential for teachers to develop a good relationship with their students because the rapport established between teachers and students, in part, determines the interest and performance level of students” (p. 159).

In an effort to highlight the impact of teacher-student relationships, this literature review will be organized into five sections. Sections one, two, and three, respectively, will present current research findings in terms of the effect of TSRs on student academic success, student social success, and teacher wellbeing. Section

four will present examples of specific teacher caring behavior, and section five will contain information regarding differences in the perception of care.

Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Academic Performance

Allen et al. (2011) conducted an experimental study in an effort to determine the effect of teacher-student relationships on student academic performance. In the study, secondary teachers were subjected to one of two methods of professional development intended to increase TSRs. One group of teachers received the traditional, large staff meeting method of professional development while the other received My Teaching Partner (MTP), an intervention program that is empirically proven to increase positive TSRs. As part of the MTP intervention program, teachers are assigned an offsite, personal coach. After reviewing a video of a teacher delivering instruction, the offsite coach provides individualized feedback regarding the teacher's relationships with students. The results of this study showed an average of 9 percentile points increase on test scores for those students whose teachers went through the MTP training. In two separate correlational studies involving the use of surveys, interviews, and classroom observations, TSRs were found to have a moderate to strong positive correlation with student achievement (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Wentzel, 1997). These findings support the link between positive TSRs and student academic success (Allen et al. 2011).

TSRs may indirectly effect student academic achievement through student motivation. Learning requires effort on the part of the student, and if a student is not motivated to learn or is not actively engaged in class, it is unlikely that achievement

will improve (Stipek, 2006). Therefore, if a teacher's primary goal is to increase academic achievement, first one must engage and motivate the students. A number of studies suggest that a crucial first step to motivate students is building positive, caring TSRs (Hughes, 2011; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Murdock & Miller, 2003). In one study involving 248 middle school students, it was found that students who perceived a higher level of teacher care also reported a higher level of motivation. (Wentzel,1997). Decker, Dona, and Christianson (2007) examined the links between TSRs and outcomes for behaviorally at risk students. Their study, involving the survey of elementary students (n=44) and teachers (n=25), found moderately strong, positive relationships between teacher and student reports of TSRs and student engagement. In summary, these results conclude that there is a positive correlation between TSRs and student engagement.

Two theories, attachment theory and self-system theory, explain the effects of positive teacher-student relationships on student academic achievement. Attachment is a bond between two people and is usually associated with the bond between a parent and child. A young child who shows preference for or retreats from an attachment figure in times of uncertainty characterizes a normal attachment relationship in children. Adult attachment behaviors include attending to the needs of the child, responding to the child's signals, and looking toward the child. A child who has formed attachment relationships feels secure and is thus able to freely explore their world (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Children can show attachment to more than one person, however, younger children seem to be more selective and are more likely to have just a few attachment figures (Roorda et al., 2011). Older children may be more tolerable of separation from attachment figures, but still benefit from a secure attachment. (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Attachment is also important for adolescents. In this time of self-discovery and exploration, adolescents need to feel secure. Adolescents feel secure when they know that their attachment figures are available. Being available for adolescents is characterized by physical proximity, being open to communicate, being responsive to their requests for help, and aware of their needs (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Teachers can, and often do play the role of an attachment figure for students. When a student has formed an attachment with a particular teacher, the student will be comfortable asking the teacher questions, be able to perform class work unafraid of making mistakes, and freely engage in social interaction with peers while in the classroom of the teacher with whom the attachment has been made (Roorda et al. 2011, Hughes, 2011).

A second relevant theory is Self-Systems Theory (Roorda et al., 2011). The central component of this theory is that in order for a child to be motivated or ready to learn, three psychological needs must be met. The three needs are relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Teachers can meet these needs by showing interest in a child both academically and personally, provide clear structure and consequences within the classroom, and choice in daily educational tasks (Roorda et al., 2011). In

her 2000 study, Osterman suggests that the organizational structure of today's schools may neglect these three psychological needs. Neglect occurs because of today's educational emphasis on standardized achievement tests. Osterman (2000) argues that in this system, "There is little formal attention to affective needs of students, and shaping the school culture are beliefs and practices that nurture individual-ism and competition, rather than community and collaboration" (p. 324). Fortunately, classroom instructional practices have been shown to have great influence on student perception of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Therefore, teachers have the power to help correct this neglect of schools by providing classroom instruction rooted in cooperative learning and dialogue (Osterman, 2000). The facilitation of cooperative learning addresses students needs for competence and relatedness by allowing students to interact regularly with their peers and allowing students to feel that they are an important part of the team process.

The third physiological need of the self-systems theory is autonomy. To address this need, teachers can provide students with the support necessary to help them become autonomous by creating an atmosphere where autonomy is valued. For example, instead of assigning punitive consequences for the misuse of autonomy, teachers should include students in the problem solving process that is necessary to make better choices in the future. Doing so shows students that their independence is important and that authority figures are an integral part of creating it (Osterman, 2000).

In light of attachment and self –systems theories, and recent literature describing the connections between these theories and TSR's, teachers are encouraged to create positive, caring relationships with their students. Positive, caring relationships not only allow children to feel secure, but also meet their basic psychological needs. When these are met, students will engage in their class work and be motivated to do well in school. Consequently, student achievement will increase. This information gives a perspective on the importance of TSRs and an explanation for their psychological roots. This information, in conjunction with the specific teacher behaviors described later in this review will aid teachers in building the strong, positive, caring TSRs that the literature has shown to be important to student academic success.

Effects of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships on Students Social Success

Teacher-student relationships have also been found to have an effect on student social success. For the purpose of this study, social success will be defined as a student's interaction with and their acceptance by peers. TSRs affect social success not only by allowing a student to feel secure and thus, more likely to engage in social interaction as described by the attachment theory (Hughes, 2011; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011), but also by playing a role in a student's acceptance by peers. If other students perceive a particular student to have a positive relationship with the teacher, they are more likely to accept the student. Conversely, if peers perceive a student's relationship with a teacher to be negative, they will be less likely to accept the student (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007).

Teachers serve as a model of appropriate behavior for students, especially in the elementary grades. This form of modeling may explain TSRs' role in peer acceptance. Mikami and Gregory (2011) provide an example of how teacher modeling may influence peer-to-peer interactions:

> Teachers who have warm, positive relationships with all students will encourage peers to similarly see the strengths in their classmates… teachers who show favoritism or differential treatment to students by having a 'pet' will communicate that it is acceptable for peers to have a social status hierarchy among themselves (p. 14).

Mikami and Gregory (2011) studied the effects of TSRs and peer relationships. In their experimental study, secondary teachers were subjected to one of two methods of professional development intended to increase TSRs. One group of teachers received the traditional, large staff meeting method of professional development while another was taught My Teaching Partner (MTP), an intervention program that is empirically proven to increase positive TSRs. As part of the MTP intervention program, teachers are assigned an offsite, personal coach. After reviewing a video of a teacher in action, the offsite coach provides individualized feedback regarding the teacher's relationships with students (Allen, 2011). In the study, peer interactions of students from both the control and experimental groups (students whose teachers received traditional staff development and those who received MTP respectively) were compared pre and post treatment. Findings reveal that students of teachers receiving the MTP treatment, showed higher gains in

observed positive peer to peer interaction (Mikami & Gregory 2011). The findings suggest that TSRs play a crucial role in student-to-student relationships and that by creating positive, caring TSRs with students, teachers can enhance students' social wellbeing.

Effects of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships on Teachers

The majority of research involving teacher-student relationships examines the effect of the relationship on the student. Less is known about the importance of the relationship on the wellbeing of the teacher (Spilt, Kooman, & Thijs, 2011). If teachers are to truly commit to the improvement of relationships they have with students, it is beneficial to explain how TSRs affect them personally. This section will review the limited research available on the subject.

Teaching has been cited as a stressful job and the stress levels are due, in part, to negative TSRs. This can be explained using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping. This model explains that experiences that are relevant to one's goals, values, or needs trigger an emotional response. If the experience is congruent with one's goals, values, or needs, the emotional response will be positive. If it is incongruent, the response will be negative. The model further explains that the more important the goal is to the individual, the more extreme the response will be (Spilt, Kooman, & Thijs, 2011).

According to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, TSRs will only affect the wellbeing of teachers if teachers place a value on them. The literature finds that TSRs are not just of value, but are of high value to teachers. Alder, (2002)

states that teachers have an innate need to connect with their students. This connection has been cited as the primary reason among novice teachers for entering the teaching profession (Alder, 2002). In his 2000 empirical study on the subject, Hargreaves found TSRs to be the most important source of enjoyment, motivation, anger, and frustration for teachers. Teachers who reported positive TSRs also reported positive emotions, less stress, and positive wellbeing. Conversely, teachers who reported negative TSRs reported the negative emotions of anger, frustration, alienation, and stress (Hargreaves, 2000).

Interestingly, elementary teachers have more emotionally intense relationships with their students than secondary teachers (Hargreaves, 2000) and thus, according to the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, TSRs may have more of an effect on elementary teacher's wellbeing than those of their secondary counterparts (Spilt, Kooman, & Thijs, 2011). These differences are linked to the differences in organizational structures between an elementary and secondary school. The secondary school structure allows for less time between teacher and individual students. Also, due to the increased maturity level of secondary students, there is more of an academic focus and relationships tend to be less personal. (Bru, et al., 2009). Based on the inherent need for teachers to have TSRs with students and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, the literature finds positive TSRs to be linked to positive wellbeing of teachers and to a decrease in teacher stress and burnout.

Perceived Teacher Caring Behaviors

It is widely accepted that positive teacher-student relationships have positive effects on student achievement (Hughes, 2011) and teacher wellbeing (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Knowing the effect however, is not enough to allow teachers to make improvements to their own TSRs. In order for improvements to be made, teachers must understand specific behaviors that are perceived by students to be caring and non-caring behaviors. Once this is understood, teachers can work to increase those behaviors perceived by students as caring and decrease those that are not. The research literature describes numerous teacher behaviors that can be categorized as interpersonal caring, academic caring, and fairness caring (Tosolt, 2009). These are detailed in the following sections.

Interpersonal Caring Behavior

Students perceive teachers to be caring if they exhibit interpersonal caring behaviors toward students, which are described as, "those behaviors that might be expected or accepted among friends or family members" (Tosolt, 2009, p. 409). Various studies involving students who participated in surveys or focus groups described teachers' interpersonal caring behaviors as joking with students (King, 2011), showing immediacy and responsiveness to student needs, calling students by name (Teven, 2001), showing respect, showing kindness, and being polite (Alder, 2002). In Finland, a researcher placed an advertisement in a magazine asking for readers to submit essays describing teachers from their past. There were 141 respondents. The participant ages ranged from 16-87 with over half of the

participants being above the age of 60. What makes this study noteworthy is that the vast majority of the respondents' essays revolved around personal aspects of their previous teachers (Utto, 2012). This unique research emphasizes the importance of teachers' interpersonal behaviors with their students. We recall things that impact us. For these 141 respondents, it is clear what impacted them most was the personal relationships that they had with their teachers. As previously mentioned, forming personal, caring TSRs with students helps them form attachment to teachers. Such attachments help students feel secure in the dealings of their daily school life and therefore, increasing student interaction with and acceptance by peers.

Academic Caring Behavior

The second category of perceived teacher caring behaviors is academic caring behavior. Academic caring behaviors are described as, "Those behaviors that encourage students to work at academic tasks" (Tosolt, 2009, p. 409). Examples of these behaviors include holding students accountable for their work (Stipek, 2006), providing constructive feedback (Wentzle, 1997), being prepared for class (Berglin & Berglin, 2009), calling home to address concerns, teaching to understanding, answering questions, and helping with academic problems (Alder, 2002). In a qualitative study involving the survey of 350 students and interview of 108 in grades 8, 10, and 12, it was found that the most significant indicator of student perceived teacher care was providing assistance to students (Whitlock, 2006). As previously mentioned in the Self-Systems Theory, such teacher behaviors meet a

child's psychological need for relatedness by indirectly showing that teachers care for students (Roorda, et al., 2011).

Alder (2002) gathered information on students' perception of teacher caring behaviors through extensive interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The results align with Self-Systems Theory's second psychological need of competence. In the study, it was found that the most impactful teacher academic behavior was a teacher's willingness to be strict, pressure students to complete work, and maintain control of or manage the class. These findings suggest a fine line between being overly friendly (going beyond interpersonal care) and overly demanding or controlling (going beyond academic care). Walking this fine line is an art that teachers must learn if they are to foster the positive, impactful, and caring relationships necessary for student and teacher success.

Fairness Caring

The third and final category of perceived teacher caring behaviors is fairness caring. Fairness caring behaviors are described as, "Those behaviors that contribute to fair treatment for all students regardless of their membership in any particular subgroup" (Tosolt, 2009, p.410). Examples of teacher fairness caring behaviors are going above and beyond to help students (King, 2011), providing time for students outside of class (Alder, 2002), providing equal opportunity and resources (Tosolt, 2009), and allowing choice or autonomy with student assignments (Berglin & Berglin, 2009). Whitlock's (2009) study involved focus groups and found a teacher's "willingness to asses youth character based on more than age, academic standing or

peer network, perceived adult willingness to give youth the benefit of the doubt" (Whitlock, 2009, p. 26) as one of the main factors in student perceptions of teacher care. Fair treatment for all students is a prerequisite for building strong TSRs, and few intentionally withhold this right. However, it should be noted that teachers were observed to provide more support to those that they report to have positive TSRs with and conversely, less support to those they report to have negative TSRs with (Hughes, 2011). An awareness of this behavior will enable teachers to monitor their own TSRs.

Differences In Perception

Recent research on the effects of TSRs has concentrated largely on the relationship from the student perspective. The emphasis on the student is because student perception is thought to be, "both reality reflecting and reality creating" (Hughes, 2011, p. 42). Without perceived care, there is no care. Tosolt (2009) states, "In schools, although many teachers purport to care about their students, their care is functionally nonexistent unless it is perceived by their students as care" (p. 405). Therefore, to truly understand TSRs and their effects, it is necessary to gather data from the student perspective (Wentzel, 1997).

Perceptions of care are different for each individual. These differences are rooted in the theory that perception is based on one's own mental representations. These representations are based on an individual's past and current relationships and thus can be altered at any time. There are two implications that relate to the classroom. The first is that teachers and students are likely to have differing

experiences and thus are expected to have different perceptions of care (Hughes, 2011). In fact, studies show that teachers tend to rate their own level of care higher than students' perception of their care (King, 2011; Decker, 2007).

Studies show that as students get older, they tend to perceive a decrease in level of teacher care (Allen et al., 2011; Bru, et al., 2010; Wentzel, 1997). Bru, et al., (2010) describe three possible explanations for the decrease in perceived care. The first explanation is linked to the organizational structure of the secondary school. Secondary schools tend to be larger in size and have an increased student to teacher ratio as compared to elementary schools. Secondary schools also tend to departmentalize teaching and place a higher emphasis on student control and discipline than elementary schools (Bru et al., 2009). This organization may make it difficult for teachers at the secondary level to create connections with their students. Students perceive the decrease in connections as a decrease in the level of care.

An alternative explanation for the differences in older as compared to younger students' perceived teacher care is their advanced cognitive ability. Older students' developmentally increased cognitive ability allows these students to judge if the content or its delivery is of value to them. If it is not, a student begins to believe that their teacher does not have their best interest in mind (Bru et al., 2009).

The third and final explanation for the difference in perceived care as a function of age is an older student's innate need for autonomy. The need for autonomy may lead older students, especially adolescence to have a negative view

of authority figures. The negative view would in turn create a negative TSR (Bru et al., 2009).

Because perception of care is derived from individual experiences, it is believed that an individual's culture will influence their perception (Alder, 2002; Garza, 2009; Tosolt, 2009). Recent qualitative studies have sought to examine the differences that may occur between the perceived teacher care of students of minority status and white students. The findings show commonalities between cultures in the specific behaviors that are perceived to be caring. Further, findings show that there are differences in what behaviors are emphasized as caring behaviors. For example, white students place the most emphasis on a teacher's ability to provide interpersonal care while minority students place an emphasis on a teacher's ability to provide academic care (Alden, 2002; Tosolt, 2009; Garza, 2009).

Summary

An extensive body of research supports the benefits of positive Teacher-Student relationships. Positive Teacher-Student relationships have been shown to positively impact student academic and social achievement. These benefits are rooted in the attachment and self-systems theories. In addition to providing benefits to students, positive TSRs have also been shown to increase a teacher's overall wellbeing and job satisfaction. These findings emphasize the importance of creating positive TSRs. Teachers who strive to foster positive, caring relationships with their students can do so by exhibiting all three categories of care- interpersonal care, academic care, and fairness care.

The literature emphasizes that even the best efforts of teachers to convey care to their students are futile if students do not perceive the behavior as caring. Research shows differences in care to be linked to age and culture. To address the needs of all students, teachers must approach relationships from an individualized perspective, knowing that caring behavior ultimately is a matter of student perception and that student perception of teacher behavior is a function of student age, sex, and culture.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This research was conducted to assist Upper Midwest Middle School (UMMS) collect data regarding its goal to provide a caring environment to its students. The research involves the creation and administration of a voluntary, anonymous, three-question survey titled the UMMS Student Perception Survey. The survey was administered to 153 UMMS students in May 2012. Survey results will provide UMMS with both the percentage of students who feel cared for and not cared for by teachers and other adults at school and specific examples of behaviors that students perceive to be both caring and non-caring. In the future data will be collected annually and compared to the results from the existing Minnesota Student Survey as well as baseline data from the first administration of this Student Perception Survey. Specifically, the research will assist UMMS to monitor its progress towards reaching its goal to improve teacher-student relationships. The research was guided by the following questions:

1. What percentage of the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School perceive teachers/adults at school care for them "*quite a bit, or very much*"?

2. What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive that they are cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

3. What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive they are not cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

The following section will describe the methodologies used in the research. It will be divided into five sections; participant characteristics, sampling procedures, sampling size, measures, and research design.

Participant Characteristics

Participants in this study were students at Upper Midwest Middle School. The school enrolls approximately 580 students in grades 7 and 8, consisting of 88% Caucasian, 5% Black, and 4% Hispanic, with 32% of the total population qualifying for free and reduced lunch (FRP). The population consists of 14% SPED and 1.9% of ELL students. UMMS is one of two middle schools in a large, upper Midwest, public school district with approximately 7,600 students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The district's demographics are similarly proportionate to those of the middle school in which the research was conducted (Minnesota Department of Education, 2012). The exact ethnicity of the research participants cannot be known, as the survey did not ask for this information. This information was purposefully left off the survey's demographic section due to UMMS's relative lack of diversity. Because of the low Black and Hispanic population at the school, these students may have felt identified if required to report their ethnicity on the survey. It was the intent of the researcher to keep its participants anonymous; therefore, ethnicity was not included in the demographic section.

Sampling Procedures

Participation in the research was voluntary and open to all students at UMMS. Per Institutional Review Board (Minnesota State University, Mankato) regulations, parental/guardian consent was required for a student to participate in the survey. Consent forms were distributed to students by their homeroom advisor two weeks prior to the administration of the survey. Upon distribution, homeroom advisors read a script that explained the upcoming opportunity to participate in research, its risks and benefits, and procedures for participation. Students who wished to participate in the survey were given the responsibility to return the signed form to their homeroom advisor prior to the survey date. Placing the responsibility to return the signed form on the student is standard practice at this middle school. Homeroom advisors reminded students about the survey and consent form due date as often as everyday and as little as once throughout the two weeks between the distribution of consent forms and the survey's administration date. The frequency of reminders was dependent on the individual homeroom teacher.

Sampling Size

The UMMS student perception survey was completed by 153 students in May 2012. This equates to a 26% participation rate. Due to incompleteness, two surveys were removed from data collection. After their removal, 151 surveys remained for analysis. Participants included 86 7th grade and 65 8th grade students of which 83 were girls and 68 were boys.

Measures

Student perception data were collected by the administration of a survey, which consisted of a short demographic section followed by three questions. The demographic section asked students to identify their sex and grade. Demographic information was used to disaggregate data into subgroups. The first question, which was taken directly from the Minnesota Student Survey, asked students the extent to which they perceived teachers/other adults at school to care for them. Students responded to the question by filling in one of the five multiple-choice responses, "*not at all, a little, some, quite a bit, or very much*." The format and language of the original Minnesota Student Survey question were used in order that the results of this survey could be compared to those of the current district and state Minnesota Student Survey Results (MN Student Survey Results, 2010). The second question asked students to, "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they care about you." Students responded to this question by writing a short response in the space provided on the survey. The third and final question asked students to, "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they do not care about you." As with question number two, students responded by providing a short written response.

The survey includes questions related to student perception of being cared for by teachers and other adults at school. Because the study focuses on the identification of what students perceive to be adult caring behaviors, no attempt was made to define the word, "care."

Research Design

The research includes both qualitative and quantitative measures of middle school student perceptions of teacher care. Research design includes the creation and administration of a three-question survey to students in an upper Midwest middle school that enrolls students in grades 7 and 8. Participants (n=151) were students who volunteered to complete the necessary parental consent forms within the two week time period between the distribution of the consent forms and administration of the survey.

All students completed the survey in homeroom on the same day in May 2012. Individual homeroom advisers administered the survey to their homeroom advisees in the regular homeroom setting. Per requirements set forth by the Minnesota State University, Mankato IRB, student participants signed an assent form prior to beginning the survey. To ensure uniformity in directions, all advisors read the assent form and survey directions out loud to students prior to the survey's administration. Participants completed the survey in an average of 5 to 10 minutes. Those students who did not participate quietly read material of their choice (a common UMMS homeroom procedure) for the duration of the survey.

Upon completion, students brought their completed survey and assent form to the front of the room and placed them in an unmarked, closed folder. At the end of the homeroom period, the researcher personally collected all unmarked folders containing the completed surveys and assent forms. No other persons were permitted to view the content of the folders. These steps were done to ensure anonymity of the participants.

Prior to analysis, survey information was manually entered into an Excel spreadsheet with each participant identified by a four-digit number. The results from question one were analyzed, disaggregated by sex and grade level, and represented as the percentage of students who responded with each level of care. Questions two and three asked students to describe behaviors that teachers/adults at school say or do that show they care/do not about them. Guided by Tesolt's (2009) study, the researcher categorized student written responses into three categories of interpersonal caring, academic caring, and fairness caring. These categories were then divided further into sub categories. After a complete analysis, a list of the five most frequently named teacher caring behaviors and non-caring behaviors was created. All results will be shared with the leadership and administration of UMMS in order to help them make informed decisions regarding future distribution and use of data. All results will be presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Results

The research was conducted in order to help Upper Midwest Middle School's leadership and staff understand the present status of achievement on their goal to provide a caring environment to all students. This research provides Upper Midwest Middle School with data regarding the current level that its students feel cared for by their teachers and other adults and information regarding specific adult behaviors that students perceive to be both caring and non-caring. These data will inform UMMS leadership and staff, so that they may monitor their progress toward accomplishing the goal of providing a caring environment for all students. This chapter explains the data analysis and presents the results of the study which was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What percentage of the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School perceive teachers/adults at school care for them "*quite a bit, or very much*"?

2. What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive that they are cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

3. What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive they are not cared for by teachers/other adults at school?

Data Analysis

The data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed in a two-step process. The first step analyzed data from question number one, "How much do you feel teachers/adults at school care for you?" The second step analyzed data from questions number two and three, "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they care about you" and, "Describe something teachers/adults at school say or do that shows they do not care about you."

The first step of analysis included the calculation of the percentage of students who responded with each of the available options. Results were then disaggregated by grade level and sex. The results show 80.2% of the students who participated in the survey perceive teachers and other adults in the school to care for them "*quite a bit or very much*." Overall, 7th grade participants reported a higher level of perceived care than 8th graders with a total of 90.7% reporting teacher care of "*quite a bit or very much*" compared to 66.2% indicated by 8th grade participants. Female respondents rated teacher care higher (84.4% of respondents reporting "*quite a bit or very much*") than males (75%) while seventh grade females reported the highest level of perceived care with 91.3% reporting "*quite a bit or very much*" and, eighth grade males reported the lowest perceived care with 53.5% reporting "*quite a bit or very much*." The complete analysis of Survey question number one is presented in Table 1.1 and 1.2. The survey results show that 80.2% of the UMMS student participants perceive teachers and other adults in school to care for them *quite a bit* or *very much*, the two highest levels of care available on the survey. These

numbers are 37.4% more than the district average and 27.6% more than the state average on the 1998-2010 (Minnesota Student Survey Results, 2010).

Table 1.1 *Perceived level of care by grade level and total.*

Perceived Level of Care	**7th (n=86)**	**8th (n=65)**	**UMMS Totals**
Very Much	23.3 (20)	7.7% (5)	16.6% (25)
Quite a bit	67.4% (58)	58.5% (38)	63.6% (96)
Some	9.3% (8)	21.5% (14)	14.6% (22)
A little	0% (0)	9.2% (6)	4% (6)
Not at all	0% (0)	3.1% (2)	1.3% (2)

Table 1.2 *Perceived level of care by sex*

Perceived Level of care	**7th Female (n=46)**	**7th Male (n=40)**	**8th Female (n=37)**	**8th Male (n=28)**	**UMMS Female (n=83)**	**UMMS Male (n=68)**
Very much	19.6 (9)	27.5% (11)	8.1% (3)	7.1% (2)	14.5% (12)	19.1% (13)
Quite a bit	71.7% (33)	62.5% (25)	67.6% (25)	46.4% (13)	69.9% (58)	55.9% (38)
Some	8.7% (4)	10% (4)	18.9% (7)	25% (7)	13.3% (11)	16.2% (11)
A little	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.4% (2)	14.3% (4)	2.4% (2)	5.9% (4)
Not at all	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	7.1% (2)	0% (0)	3% (2)

The second step of analysis involved recording and synthesizing student written responses for question numbers two and three. These questions are, "Describe something teachers/adults at UMMS say or do that shows they care about you" and, "Describe something teachers/adults at UMMS say or do that shows they do not care about you." Student responses were examined and entered into one of

three categories based on Tesolt's (2009) study. In the study, Tesolt describes three categories of care; Interpersonal Caring, behaviors that might be expected or accepted among friends or family members; Academic Caring, behaviors that encourage students to work on academic tasks; and Fairness Caring, behaviors that contribute to fair treatment for all students regardless of their membership in any particular subgroup. In an attempt to capture a more accurate description of student described adult caring and non-caring behaviors, each of Tesolt's three categories were divided further into subcategories. Subcategories were determined by reference to the examples of care provided in the literature (Tosolt, 2009; King, 2011; Teven, 2001; Alder, 2002; Stipek, 2006; Wentzel, 1997; Berglin & Berglin, 2009) and the actual student responses obtained from the survey. A number of students reported more than one behavior for each of the two short answer questions. In this case, each behavior was recorded separately. For example one student replied, "Teachers teach us in a way that helps us to truly understand what they are teaching. Sometimes, when we score badly they let us retake the test." In this response, two separate Academic Caring behaviors are described-Teaching to Understanding and Allowing Retakes. In other cases, students did not describe a behavior in response to the question. For example, "I can't think of anything" or "They don't do anything that shows they don't care." Due to these and similar events, the results show a greater number of responses for caring behaviors (N=195) than participants (N=151) and a lower number of responses for non-caring behaviors (N=140) than participants (N=151). The data for each question were disaggregated by grade level and are presented on Tables 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, and 3.2.

Table 2.1 *Perceived adult caring behaviors by category and subcategory*

	UMMS Total (n=195)	**7th (n=115)**	**8th (n=80)**
Academic Caring	**58.5% (114)**	**56.5% (65)**	**61.3% (49)**
Has clear expectations	1% (2)	0% (0)	2.5% (2)
Provides encouragement	8.2% (16)	4.3% (5)	13.8% (11)
Provides academic support	37.9% (74)	35.7% (41)	41.3% (33)
Teaches to understanding	7.7% (15)	10.4% (12)	3.8% (3)
Class is engaging	.5% (1)	.9% (1)	0% (0)
Makes Learning fun	1% (2)	1.7% (2)	0% (0)
Allows Test Corrections	2.1% (4)	3.4% (4)	0% (0)
Fairness Caring	**11.3% (22)**	**13.9% (16)**	**7.5% (6)**
Allows students to be heard	1% (2)	0% (0)	2.5% (2)
Prevents bullying	2.1% (4)	2.6% (3)	1.3% (1)
Gives students the benefit of the doubt	1% (2)	0% (0)	2.5% (2)
Provides time outside of class	6.2% (12)	9.6% (11)	1.3% (1)
Provides resources	1% (2)	1.7% (2)	0% (0)
Interpersonal Caring	**30.3% (59)**	**29.6% (34)**	**31.3% (25)**
Attentive to students	9.2% (18)	7.8% (9)	11.3% (9)
Shows kindness	5.1% (10)	5.2% (6)	5% (4)
Meets students personal needs	8.2% (16)	8.7% (10)	7.5% (6)
Shows respect	.5% (1)	0% (0)	1.3% (1)
Ensures safety of students	5.1% (10)	4.3% (5)	6.3% (5)
Jokes with students	2.1% (4)	3.5% (4)	0% (0)

Table 2.2 *Perceived adult non-caring behaviors by subcategory*

	UMMS Total (n=140)	**7th (n=83)**	**8th (n=57)**
Academic	**22.9% (32)**	**25.3% (21)**	**19.3% (11)**
Class is not fun	.7% (1)	0 % (0)	1.8% (1)
Does not provide support	8.6% (12)	6% (5)	12.3% (7)
Does not teach to understanding	2.1% (3)	0% (0)	5.3% (3)
Class is not engaging	1.4% (2)	2.4% (2)	0% (0)
Does not provide test correction opportunities	2.1% (3)	3.6% (3)	0% (0)
Has unclear expectations	5.7% (8)	9.6% (8)	0% (0)
Excessive Workload	2.1% (3)	3.6 (3)	0% (0)
Fairness	**34.3% (48)**	**33.7% (28)**	**35.1% (20)**
Does not allow students to be heard	7.1% (10)	9.6% (8)	3.5% (2)
Does not prevent bullying	3.6% (5)	2.4% (2)	5.3% (3)
Does not give students benefit of the doubt	12.1% (17)	9.6% (8)	15.8% (9)
Shows preferential treatment towards students	9.3% (13)	9.6% (8)	8.8% (5)
Does not provide time outside of class	1.4% (2)	1.2% (1)	1.8% (1)
Does not provide resources	.7% (1)	1.2% (1)	0% (0)
Interpersonal	**42.9% (60)**	**40.9% (34)**	**45.6% (26)**
Verbally aggressive	24.3% (34)	25.3% (21)	22.8% (13)
Shows anger	2.9% (4)	3.6% (3)	1.8% (1)
Not attentive to students	6.4% (9)	6% (5)	7% (4)
Does not keep confidentiality	1.4% (2)	0% (0)	3.5% (2)
Does not show kindness	3.6% (5)	2.4% (2)	5.3% (3)
Does not show respect	2.9% (4)	2.4% (2)	3.5% (2)
Does not keep students safe	.7% (1)	0% (0)	1.8% (1)
Does not show patience	.7% (1)	1.2% (1)	0% (0)

Table 3.1 *Perceived adult caring behaviors by sex*

	7th Female (n=65)	**7th Male (n=50)**	**8th Female (n=52)**	**8th Male (n=28)**	**UMMS Total Female (n=117)**	**UMMS Total Male (n=78)**
Academic	**58.5% (38)**	**54% (27)**	**57.7 (30)**	**67.8% (19)**	**58.1% (68)**	**59% (46)**
Has clear expectations	0% (0)	0% (0)	0 % (0)	7.1% (2)	0% (0)	2.6% (2)
Provides encouragement	6.2% (4)	2% (1)	17.3% (9)	7.1% (2)	11.1% (13)	3.8% (3)
Provides academic support	36.9% (24)	34% (17)	34.6% (18)	53.6% (15)	35.9% (42)	41% (32)
Teaches to understanding	9.2% (6)	12% (6)	5.8% (3)	0% (0)	7.7% (9)	7.7% (6)
Class is engaging	1.5% (1)	0% (0)	0 % (0)	0% (0)	.9% (1)	0% (0)
Makes Learning fun	0% (0)	4% (2)	0 % (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	2.6% (2)
Allows Test Corrections	4.6% (3)	2% (1)	0 % (0)	0% (0)	2.6% (3)	1.3% (1)
Fairness	**15.4% (10)**	**12% (6)**	**9.6% (5)**	**3.6% (1)**	**12.8% (15)**	**9% (7)**
Allows students to be heard	0% (0)	0% (0)	3.8% (2)	0% (0)	1.7% (2)	0% (0)
Prevents bullying	3.1% (2)	2% (1)	1.9% (1)	0% (0)	2.6% (3)	1.3% (1)
Gives students the benefit of the doubt	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.9% (1)	3.6% (1)	.9% (1)	1.3% (1)
Provides time outside of class	10.8% (7)	8% (4)	1.9% (1)	0% (0)	6.8% (8)	5.1% (4)
Provides resources	1.5% (1)	2% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	.9% (1)	1.3% (1)
Interpersonal	**26.2% (17)**	**34% (17)**	**32.7% (17)**	**28.6% (8)**	**29% (34)**	**32% (25)**
Attentive to students	4.6% (3)	12% (6)	17.3% (9)	0% (0)	10.3% (12)	7.7% (6)
Shows kindness	7.7% (5)	2% (1)	5.8% (3)	3.6% (1)	6.8% (8)	2.6% (2)
Meets students personal needs	7.7% (5)	10% (5)	7.7% (4)	7.1% (2)	7.7% (9)	9% (7)
Shows respect	0 % (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	3.6% (1)	0% (0)	1.3% (1)
Ensures safety of students	4.6% (3)	4% (2)	1.9% (1)	14.3% (4)	3.4% (4)	7.7% (6)
Jokes with students	1.5% (1)	6% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1% (1)	3.8% (3)

Table 3.2 Perceived adult non-caring behaviors by gender

	7th female (n=50)	7th male (n=33)	8th female (n=40)	8th male (n=17)	UMMS Total female (n=90)	UMMS Total male (n=50)
Academic	**36% (18)**	**9.1% (3)**	**20% (8)**	**17.6% (3)**	**28.9% (26)**	**12% (6)**
Class is not fun	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.9% (1)	0% (0)	2% (1)
Does not provide support	10% (5)	0% (0)	15% (6)	5.9% (1)	12.2% 911)	2% (1)
Does not teach to understanding	0% (0)	0% (0)	5% (2)	5.9% (1)	2.2% (2)	2% (1)
Class is not engaging	4% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	2.2% (2)	0% (0)
Does not provide test correction opportunities	4% (2)	3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	2.2% (2)	2% (1)
Has unclear expectations	12% (6)	6.1% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	6.7% (6)	4% (2)
Excessive Workload	6% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	3.3% (3)	0% (0)
Fairness	**28% (14)**	**42.4% (14)**	**27.5% (11)**	**53% (9)**	**27.8% (25)**	**46% (23)**
Does not allow students to be heard	12% (6)	6.1% (2)	5% (2)	0% (0)	8.9% (8)	4% (2)
Does not prevent bullying	2% (1)	3% (1)	2.5% (1)	11.8% (2)	2.2% (2)	6% (3)
Does not give students benefit of the doubt	8% (4)	12.1% (4)	10% (4)	29.4% (5)	8.9% (8)	18% (9)
Shows preferential treatment towards students	6% (3)	15.2% (5)	7.5% (3)	11.8% (2)	6.7% (6)	14% (7)
Does not provide time outside of class	0% (0)	3% (1)	2.5% (1)	0% (0)	1.1% (1)	2% (1)
Does not provide resources	0% (0)	3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	2% (1)
Interpersonal	**36%(18)**	**48.5% (16)**	**52.5% (21)**	**29.4% (5)**	**43.3% (39)**	**42% (21)**
Verbally aggressive	24% (12)	27.3% (9)	25% (10)	17.6 (3)	24.4% (22)	24% (12)
Shows anger	2% (1)	6.1% (2)	2.5% (1)	0% (0)	2.2% (2)	4% (2)
Not attentive to students	4% (2)	9.1% (3)	7.5% (3)	5.9% (1)	5.6% (5)	8% (4)
Does not keep confidentiality	0% (0)	0% (0)	5% (2)	0% (0)	2.2% (2)	0% (0)
Does not show kindness	4% (2)	0% (0)	7.5% (3)	0% (0)	5.6% (5)	0% (0)
Does not show respect	0% (0)	6.1% (2)	5% (2)	0% (0)	2.2% (2)	4% (2)
Does not keep students safe	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	5.9% (1)	0% (0)	2% (1)
Does not show patience	2% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.1% (1)	0% (0)

Following complete analysis of survey results from question numbers two and three, a list of the five most frequently named student reported teacher caring behaviors and five most student reported teacher non-caring behaviors was developed. The lists, which contain the most commonly named subcategories for each of the two questions, are presented tables 4.1 and 4.2.

The results show Academic Caring to be the most frequently experienced category described in student responses. This category contains 58.5% of all student responses. The most frequent adult caring behavior described by students was Academic Support in the classroom. Example responses that indicate an adult's Academic Support as a caring behavior include, "They always ask if I need help, and if I do, they don't get frustrated by having to give it," "I know they care about me because they're always helping me with school work," and "They've all tried to help me achieve my goals."

The second most frequently named adult caring behavior is Attentive to Students Needs. Student responses included, "They always have a friendly smile, they all know my name, they say hi in the hallways," and "They actually care about what we do out of school. Some even make a point to come to our sports events."

The third most common adult caring behavior is Meeting Students' Personal Needs. Examples responses include, "Teacher at UMMS ask if you're ok if you don't look like it or they will ask if you want to see (the school councilor)," "They care about how you feel and what you say" and "If I am looking sad, they ask why and try to cheer me up. One of my teachers actually cried after our conversation."

The majority of student non-caring behavior responses fell in the interpersonal care category with 42.9% of all responses. Verbal aggressiveness was the most commonly cited teacher non-caring behavior. Student responses include, "Sometimes they yell for no reason. It makes me mad, and scared to ask them anything again," "When a teacher is scolding students using sarcasm it makes me feel that the teacher does not care a lot," "Sometimes a teacher's joking around goes too far and starts to get offensive," and "They tell you to shut up." The second most common non-caring behavior is teachers do Not Give Students the Benefit of the Doubt. Example responses include, "When they don't believe you when you tell them what you are doing and where you are supposed to be," and "Teachers judge sometimes. They say 'I don't believe you' even if someone is telling the truth." The third most common non-caring behavior was cited as Showing Preferential Treatment Toward Students. Example responses include, "Teachers favor some students over others. They let them be more responsible," "Teachers pick favorites and those favorites get to do whatever they want," "Teachers only yell at me and not my friends," and "Teachers do not call on everyone equally and it makes you feel left out."

Table 5.1 *Five most frequently named caring behaviors. Numbers represent frequency*

5 Most Frequently Described Caring Behaviors UMMS		5 Most Frequently Described Caring Behaviors 8th Grade		5 Most Frequently Described Caring Behaviors 7th	
Provides academic support	74	Provides academic support	33	Provide academic support	41
Attentive to students	18	Provides encouragement	11	Teaches to understanding	12
Meets students personal needs	16	Attentive to students	9	Provides time outside of class	11
Provides encouragement	16	Meets personal needs	6	Meets student's personal needs	10
Teaches to understanding	15	Ensures safety of students	5	Attentive to students	9

Table 5.2 *Five most frequently named non-caring behaviors. Describes number of responses*

5 Most Frequently Described Non-Caring Behaviors UMMS		5 Most Frequently Described Non-Caring Behaviors 8th		5 Most Frequently Described Non-Caring Behaviors 7th	
Verbally aggressive	34	Verbally aggressive	13	Verbally aggressive	21
Does not give students the benefit of the doubt	17	Does not give students the benefit of the doubt	9	Has unclear expectations	8
Shows preferential treatment towards students	13	Does not provide academic support	7	Does not allow students to be heard	8
Does not provide academic support	12	Shows preferential treatment of students	5	Does not give students the benefit of the doubt	8
Does not allow students to be heard	10	Not attentive to students	4	Shows preferential treatment of students	8

Summary

In the present study survey data were used to determine what percentage of the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School perceive that teachers/adults at school care for them "*not at all, a little, some, quite a bit, or very much.*" Survey data were analyzed by determining the percentage of students who responded to one of five available multiple-choice options. Data were disaggregated by grade and sex. Findings show that 84.4% of respondents perceive teachers/adults at UMMS to care for them *quite a bit, or very much*. Overall, 7th graders reported a higher level of perceived care (90.7% *quite a bit or very much*) than 8th graders (66.2%).

Additionally, the study was conducted to determine the most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the 7th and 8th grade students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive that they are and are not cared for by teachers or other adults at school. Students' short answer responses were categorized and subcategorized by the researcher. Data were disaggregated by grade and. sex. The five most frequent caring behaviors are Provides Academic Support, Attentive to Student Needs, Provides Encouragement, and Teaches to Understanding. The five most frequent non-caring behaviors are being Verbally Aggressive, Not Giving Students the Benefit of the Doubt, Showing Preferential Treatment Toward Students, Not Providing Academic Support, and Not Allowing Students to be Heard. Conclusions based on the research results, research limitations, and future research needs will be addressed in chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Three research questions guided the design and execution of this research initiative, and the questions have been addressed by careful analysis of the study's survey data. This chapter contains three sections. The first presents the research conclusions, the second addresses the limitations of the study, and the third describes areas for future research.

Research Conclusions

Teacher-student relationships' effects on student achievement are well documented; and therefore, in the present era of accountability, schools and districts would benefit by measuring their progress in cultivating an environment that nurtures positive, teacher-student relationships. The goal of this research was to create and administer a survey that would provide Upper Midwest Middle School with data to assess ongoing teacher-student relationships.

The survey results show that 80.2% of the UMMS student participants perceive teachers and other adults in school to care for them *quite a bit* or *very much*, the two highest levels of care available on the survey. These numbers are 37.4% more than the district average and 27.6% more than the state average on the 1998-2010 (Minnesota Student Survey Results, 2010). The results suggest that the UMMS leadership and staff are successful with 80.2% of the grade 7 and 8 students

in terms of having positive teacher-student relationships\meeting their students' psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

However, when disaggregated by grade there is a disparity between perceived care in the 7th and 8th grades. The percentage of 7th graders who reported that teachers and other adults cared for them *quite a bit* or *very much* was 24.5% more than their 8th grade counterparts. Although this disparity between grade levels is consistent with the research findings, it may be an area for concern as a large body of research shows student relationships to be one of the most important factors for increasing student success.

Following analysis of the survey data, student written responses for question numbers two and three were synthesized into a list of the five most frequently named adult caring behaviors and non-caring behaviors. These responses addressed the second and third research questions, "What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the grade 7 and 8 students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive that they are cared for by teachers/other adults at school?" and "What are the five most frequently named adult behaviors that lead the students at Upper Midwest Middle School to perceive they are not cared for by teachers/other adults at school?" Care responses most frequently aligned with the academic caring category. Students most named teacher care as those behaviors that provided academic support. These results are consistent with the literature, which states that academic support provides students with a feeling of competence; one of the three psychological needs described by self -systems theory. Students in secondary

schools understand the emphasis on academics and therefore feel cared for by those who provide academic support. Failing to provide academic support is detrimental to a student's feeling of competence. Teachers should seek out best practice methods of providing instruction because of the obvious direct academic implications and the effects they have on teacher-student relationships.

The second and third most frequently named caring behaviors fit into the Interpersonal Care category and are: being attentive to students, and meeting students' personal needs respectively. Both of these behaviors are supported by attachment theory, which states that children perform most successfully when they have established a secure relationship with an attachment figure. Security for adolescents includes knowing that their attachment figure is available, open to communication, and is aware and able to meet their personal needs. Neglecting to provide interpersonal care accounted for the top three non-caring behaviors described by UMMS students. The top three non-caring results listed in order are verbal aggressiveness, failing to give students the benefit of the doubt and showing preferential treatment toward students. These results emphasize the importance of a whole child approach to teaching. In today's accountability driven world, it is easy to focus solely on academics. However, teachers who embrace caring relationships with their students should strive address both the personal and academic needs of their students.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. The first limitation is the survey sample. The entire student population of UMMS had the opportunity to participate, however, due to regulations and the survey's voluntary nature, only those who returned signed consent forms were able to participate in the study (26% participation rate). The low participation rate may account for the high percentage of students who reported to feel cared for *quite a bit or very much*. It is not known nor can it be assumed how 74% of students who did not participate would have answered and therefore, the data could be skewed.

The second limitation of the research is the limited disaggregation of data. The current survey disaggregates data by two demographics, grade level and sex. This limited disaggregation does not lend itself to identify possible correlations between other demographics such as race or socioeconomic status. If UMMS chooses to continue this research in the future, it could benefit from disaggregating the data further to identify other patterns or correlations.

A third limitation of the study is that the synthesis of student written responses into subcategories represent the work of one researcher, and is therefore open to subjectivity and bias. The research would benefit from multiple researchers categorizing written responses independently to improve inter-rater reliability.

This research was conducted at one middle school in one district in the Upper Midwestern United States. Due to this fact, generalizations should be used with caution.

Future Research

It is the intent of the researcher and UMMS to continue this study by collecting student perception data annually. To increase the validity of the research, steps must be taken to address the limitations presented in the previous limitations section. Future research should include a larger sample size, possibly obtained by announcing the survey to parents and students earlier in the school year or inclusion of survey reminders on UMMS's in house announcement system, an expanded demographics section, and multiple researchers collaborating to categorize data into categories and subcategories. Longitudinal data will also allow UMMS to study the impact of focused school and grade level interventions to improve TSRs.

If successful at the building level, this research should be expanded to include all schools within Upper Midwest School District. The addition of all schools would not only provide school leaders and staff a better understanding of student perceptions of care as they progress throughout Upper Midwest School Districts educational system, but also allow schools within the district to compare data for the purpose of identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Summary

This research has provided UMMS with data useful to determine progress it is making on its goal to provide a caring environment for its students. It has also

identified the five most frequently named student perceived adult caring and non-caring behaviors.

The research findings show that 80.2% of UMMS participants feel cared for *quite a bit* or *very much* by teachers and other adults in school. These numbers are higher than comparable results from the Minnesota Student Survey (2010). The results also show that 7th graders report a higher level of care than 8th grades. This difference between 7th and 8th grade reported level of care, although consistent with the literature, might be a concern as a growing body of research cites teacher-student relationships as a major factor in student academic success. Survey data reveal the five most frequently named student perceived adult caring behaviors as providing academic support, being attentive to students, meeting students personal needs, providing encouragement, and teaching to understanding. The five most frequently named student perceived adult non-caring behaviors are being verbally aggressive towards students, not giving students the benefit of the doubt, showing preferential treatment toward students, not providing academic support, and not allowing students to be heard. With this information, UMMS and other middle schools with similar demographics will be better informed to make decisions regarding the improvement of teacher-student relationships.

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Appendix

UMMS Student Perceptions Survey

Please check the boxes that apply:

☐ ☐ Male: Female: 7th ☐ Grade: 8th ☐ Grade:

1. How much do you feel teachers/other adults at school care for you?

☐ Not at all ☐ A little ☐ ☐ Some ☐ Quite a bit
Very much

Short Answer:

2. Describe something teachers/adults at Dakota Meadows say or do that shows they care about you.

3. Describe something teachers/adults at Dakota Meadows say or do that shows they do not care about you.