Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of *Creating Space* as a Holistic Approach to Promoting Adolescent Health and Wellbeing

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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January 2019

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Acknowledgements

First, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary staff members that participated in this study, without whom this work would not have been possible. Their commitment to the students and families they work with, the schools and communities they work in, the connections they develop, and their support of one another is inspiring. Working with each of you was an honor and a privilege. You are changing the world.

Thank you to my ever so patient, understanding and encouraging adviser, Dr. Carolyn Porta. Your continued and unwavering belief in me is remarkable. Dr. Renee Sieving, my co-adviser, your abiding support and guidance have been such gifts. I am in awe of both of you, as you remain grounded in nursing practice and teaching while engaging in prolific scholarship. Your advocacy, research, and innovation around adolescent health brought me to this program and has shaped my worldview in ways I never imagined. In addition to my phenomenal advisers, I want to express immense gratitude to my committee members Dr. Barbara McMorris, Dr. Cynthia Gross, and Dr. Annie Hansen-Burke. You each, in your own ways through coursework, mentorship, and fellowship, have touched my life and my work. Your steadfast encouragement and contribution from your areas of expertise continue to inspire and motivate me.

To the Leadership Education in Adolescent Health (LEAH) fellowship program funders, staff and my fellowship cohort, it was a privilege to have learned from and with each of you. You are visionaries. I also want to extend my profound appreciation to the numerous funders that believed in this research and contributed to my doctoral training through encouragement and financial support. Thank you to the A. Marilyn Sime Scholarship funding through the Center for Spirituality and Healing (CSPH), the Sophia Fund for Public Health Research and the generous School of Nursing Scholarships I received.

I also want to sincerely thank all the faculty and staff at the School of Nursing and the CSPH who have given so much time and energy to supporting students pursuing practice and

research aimed at promoting health and wellbeing guided by an integrative health paradigm. The minor coursework through CSPH was a reminder of the innate inner-resources and natural tendency toward resilience within all of us. Kathy, I am especially thankful for your presence in my life, your perspective and wisdom. I also want to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Brooke Cunningham for taking a chance on me. The opportunity to work with you was life altering in many ways. Meg, I sincerely thank you for your, patience, guidance and formatting expertise. Charlie, Andrew, Liz, and Kim your library and technical support were invaluable; you all went above and beyond.

To each and every member of our doctoral cohort, thank you for your friendship and encouragement. To my very dear friends Carrie, Sarah, Sohye, Lindsay, and Kristin, your passion, vision, and fortitude inspired me along the way and continues to provide strength and energy in my work and life. You all gave me the courage to endure. Thank you to my loving and encouraging friends near and far, many educators, nurses or service providers healing the world with their presence and profession. Finally, I'd like to express a special note of gratitude to Heidi, Leah, Carolyn and Shelley for providing insight and feedback for the study along the way.

A universal message of appreciation to every patient, client, student, educator and stranger that has crossed my path; thank you for teaching me so much more than I could have imagined. Collectively you have shared your wisdom and love in person and from afar.

Mom, your unconditional love for and acceptance of your own children always extended to every young person you encounter. You helped me recognize resilience and wholeness in others, and ignited my passion for adolescent health. Dad, your enthusiasm for all things space, science and mystery, along with your wisdom, courage and determination will forever be a part of who I am. To my dearest friend and brother, I cannot express with words how much I love, appreciate, and admire you. You have always been and continue to be a beacon of light and hope for me.

Ron, Connie, Chad, Lisa, Tyson, C.J., and Joe, I cannot thank you enough for embracing me as part of your family, loving and caring for our children along the way, and supporting our family in so many ways. To my extended family on both sides; you create a community; you are a blessing. To Ceil Wicker, it is as if you are family. Your boundless love and incredible caring has helped shape our children into who they are. I am forever grateful for your presence in our lives and for always making me laugh!

Lastly, it is with my whole being that I share these words of gratitude with my loving family, Mark, Elijah Ronald and Nina Marie. Eli, thank you for being so loving and understanding, and of course for being my “teacher”, as you say. You are wise beyond your age. Nina, your smile, your dancing, and your playfulness brings beauty and lightness to our home. Mark, thank you for helping me be brave, keeping me grounded, and reminding me of my spirit. Your ability to help me find my way when I am lost is an act of grace, an act of true love. Cheers to whatever comes next . . .

Dedication

To Nina – One with grace

To Eli - Our gift from God

To Junior – Our spirit dog

To Mark – For always

To my parents – For everything

To my brother Joshua – The wholehearted one

To every caring adult that builds community, learning with and from young people,
seeing their strengths, and recognizing their resilience.

To youth everywhere, we believe in you.

Abstract

Connection with a caring adult in the school setting contributes to healthy youth development, yet little is known about the nuanced patterns and processes leading to *student-staff connectedness* (*SSC*). The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory study was to explore the process through which school staff members connect with students in middle school settings and identify the factors influencing that process.

Data was collected and analyzed over a nearly two-year period using semi-structured interviews and observations with 24 staff members in varying roles from two middle schools situated within a large, metropolitan school district in the Midwest. Line-by-line, focused and theoretically-sensitive axial coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, extensive memoing and reflexive journaling were used to analyze data.

The integrative theory of *Creating Space* is the core, overarching process within which the SSC process takes place. *Creating Space* and the *SSC* process describe *what* staff members do. The *how* is characterized by (a) the higher-level awareness process of *seeing within, beyond and between*; (b) two translational processes described as *embracing our shared humanness*, and *equilibrating with empathy*; and (c) a praxis-level process of *demonstrating relational artistry*. The multi-dimensional space that is created by school staff members offers numerous potential *connection-catalysts* that may spark a students-staff connection.

Nurses, teachers and other allied staff working with adolescents in schools have an opportunity to encourage healthy youth development, promote human thriving, and contribute to equity and social justice by *Creating Space* within which meaningful connections can flourish.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Relationships are the most important thing for a student to be successful here."

- Study participant

Note. References from this chapter are included in the comprehensive bibliography

A Creating Space Narrative

"If they [students] feel connected, if they trust me, if we have some sort of a bond, now when they come in to class they feel safe, they feel like they belong, they're far more likely to listen. Some of the little things, like, yeah, they'll follow the rules and stuff, but they're also far more willing to go out on a limb for something. They might be more likely to speak up in class with me because they feel a connection to me. If I ask them to do something that maybe is a little bit beyond their abilities, they'll at least attempt it; whereas I feel like, a lot of times, if they're in a class where they just feel like a teacher's talking at them, that's a quick way to shut down and not pay attention. . . . I also just think in general it's a human condition kind of thing. It's important to me that they do feel it, because you never know exactly the background stories for kids and what life looks like as soon as they leave the walls here, so it's important to me that they have at least one person that they feel like, I at least for that 60 minutes or 40 minutes or whatever, 'I have somebody that I trust. I have somebody that I want to be around, that is an adult, that I may not have any other part of my day.' . . . .

Of course, all the material is important, but the kids have to feel like this is a place where they feel safe, a place that they like, but also a place they feel ownership of, as well. And for each kid, that's a little bit different, and that's the tough part [goes on to explain many opportunities for involvement with school activities]. . . . So if they feel connected to me in 6th grade, and they find somebody to latch onto in the next one, if that's all it takes to get them to keep getting up in the morning and coming here as they get older, that's important: that they're getting used to the process of being in school, and then keeping going with everything as they get older." (Teacher)

Purpose

The purpose of this grounded theory study was twofold: a) to explore the process that school staff members, in varying professional roles, engage in while attempting to connect with students in middle school settings, and b) to capture the emerging theoretical framework of this

connection process, including influential ecological factors. The overarching research question was: *What is the theoretical process, and the related ecological factors that influence the process, through which school staff members connect with students in middle school settings?* Using an ecological lens, I aimed to discover a deep, nuanced understanding of how school personnel go about connecting with students, including what factors might support or hinder this process. Such an endeavor necessitates qualitative methodology that can go beyond typical quantitative measures of school connectedness. Through this constructivist grounded theory study I aspired to collect and analyze data in a way that would facilitate an understanding of the *why* and *how* of student-staff connectedness, thus moving the exploration from one of outcomes to one of processes.

More broadly, I engaged in this line of inquiry using an ecological lens, as well as my perspective and training as a nurse, as a way to bolster the science of caring adult-youth (CAY) connections. My intention with this study was to engage in an upstream approach to the prevention of public health issues such as mental and behavioral health problems and youth violence, among others, as well as to contribute to the promotion of healthy adolescent development. I hoped to do this by capitalizing on an existing protective factor, namely CAY connections, and more specifically those that develop in school settings. In the context of this study I label these connections as student-staff connections (SSC). The goal was to gain knowledge and a deeper understanding of the SSC process as a way to buffer risk factors and promote health and wellbeing for young people, and in turn for families, community and society.

Caring Adult-Youth Connections in Schools: A Promising Health Asset

Having a perceived connection with a caring adult is a protective factor that can significantly enhance academic, health and wellbeing for adolescents in myriad ways (CDC, 2018; Guay, Denault, Renauld, 2017; Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012; Resnick, et al. 1997; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, &

Montague, 2006; Voisin, Salazar, Crosby, Diclemente, Yarber, & Staples-Horne, 2005). Healthy youth development reduces risk behaviors and positively impacts youth, families, communities and societies (Resnick et al., 2012). Current research indicates the value of connectedness between staff and students, especially during early adolescence, yet the "how" of connectedness remains elusive. Developmentally appropriate connected relationships, especially ones between youth and caring adults, are considered a key protective factor during adolescence, contributing to the promotion of both internal and external developmental assets (Search Institute, 2018a, 2018b). Such developmental relationships at home are critical as well, but as children transition into early adolescence and middle-school, how they feel (or don't feel) connected to their school and the people within school, has an increasingly strong impact on their educational and health trajectories. While recognizing the absence of an agreed upon definition of school connectedness or student-staff connections, and the necessity to move towards a universally accepted definition as identified in extant literature (GarcÍa-Moya, Bunn, Jiménez-Iglesias, Paniagua, & Brooks, 2018), the specific intent of this dissertation was aimed at understanding how staff think about, intuit, and move through their connection experiences with students. This study explores the social process of SSC, which may offer further insight into what might be important in defining the process and the connections as an outcome. Perhaps the findings will aid in future investigations and conceptualizations of the definition, but the focus of this study is on process.

The narrative presented at the beginning of this chapter illuminates the complexity of trying to define the relationality of connectedness specific to how students and staff interact and do or do not reciprocate those connections. More importantly, this account of navigating connectedness with students illustrates the core process, and many of the sub-processes, that he and other participants engage in as they attempt to connect with students. *Creating Space* emerged as the overarching, core process (i.e. core category) fundamental to the facilitation of connections with staff, thus influencing school connectedness more broadly. It is the process

through which school staff members, from varying roles, create a multidimensional space that yields countless potential connection-catalysts that may be recognized and seized/accepted by a student. These initial connection "sparks", and an entree to the more concrete SSC process, will be described in manuscript form in Chapters 4 and 5.

Dissertation Aims

Aim 1) To develop an interpretive theoretical model, grounded in the perspectives and experiences of school staff members, about the process of student-staff connectedness in middle schools.

Aim 2) To identify factors at multiple ecological levels that school staff members perceive as integral to effective student-staff connectedness processes.

Method

In alignment with the research question, this study is guided by constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014). This methodology is an ideal approach for discerning the underlying mechanisms of student-staff connectedness from the perspective of caring adults engaging with youth in middle school settings. This study took place over a nearly two-year period, with seven months of data collection. Twenty-four participants were interviewed on one occasion each and data was collected from 45 observation sessions. I approached the study with an open mind about where the participants, the data and the analysis may lead while engaging in continual reflexive thinking and writing throughout the study, including intentionally not linking the findings that emerged from the data with a priori theories. Theories and frameworks influential to the decision to explore SSC as a process are described in the literature review and my reflexivity around those theories is provided in Chapter 3.

The Integrative Theory of Creating Space

Through this inquiry, participants unveiled the expansive, yet simple and fundamentally human, process of *Creating Space* that they engage in to develop and cultivate student-staff

connections (SSC). The main finding in this study is the emerging, integrative theory of Creating Space wherein the SSC process occurs. During the iterative data collection and analytic process an intricate web of process-influencing factors at multiple ecological levels, as well as the nuanced praxis-level SSC process surfaced. Interestingly, though many of the factors influencing the connection process were common and somewhat expected extrinsic and environmental, the most frequently and fervently described or actioned factors were at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. The SSC process is inherently interpersonal, but what developed through the use of constructivist grounded theory methodology is that SSC is a more concrete process occurring within the broader integrative theory of Creating Space. Regardless of role within the school setting, all participants alluded to an intentionality of conveying belief in, care for and reverence towards the students with whom they engage. In addition to an underlying intentionality, participants engaged in Creating Space and the SSC process authentically and with what I describe as responsive attentiveness. Moreover, participants were alluding to the intrapersonal as a critical component to being able to enact the SSC process by way of creating a multi-dimensional space wherein students may or may not grasp onto, or "take in", one of the myriad connection catalysts arising within the created space.

It is with great care, conscientiousness and deliberation that I named the categories and concepts and attended to all language used throughout analysis and writing. The use of the word *emerging* in reference to the proposed theoretical understanding of Creating Space is intentional because this finding is based on a small cohort of participants, within a specific time-space context, whom represent only a partial perspective of an interpersonal phenomenon of connecting with another. I also recognize from my own personal and professional experiences that Creating Space, as an approach to cultivating connections, may be applicable to developing relationships in other contexts; however, this is speculative and requires further investigation, thus warranting the use of *emerging* as a clarifying term. The term *integrative* is also a deliberate choice as it

honors the ontological and epistemological origins of a constructivist grounded theory approach, as well as my own perspective of being in partnership with participants as co-creators of the Creating Space framework. Each manuscript offers additional insight into the decision-making, use and definition of constructs and conceptual terminology used to illustrate the phenomenological experiences of middle-school staff members striving to connect with students.

Significance

Although extensive research on school climate and school connectedness has been conducted, and recommendations have been made for strengthening both (Blum, n.d., 2005; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002), policy makers and school staff would benefit from a greater understanding of how and why school connectedness occurs. McNeely and Falci (2004) and Garcia-Moya et al. (2018) suggest that future research should explore each component of school connectedness independently and specifically seek a greater understanding of teacher-student relationships. Given the complexity of culture and climate in any setting, and specifically in schools, quantitative measurement alone likely does not provide the context necessary to gain a holistic understanding of student-teacher connections. Instead, qualitative inquiry methods provide a pathway to nuanced and tacit information by way of interviews, observations and collection of documents or artifacts that may illuminate the implicit or latent aspects of the SSC phenomenon. This study aims to fill that gap for two reasons. First, little is known about which specific school characteristics and processes promote overall school connectedness (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Second, I am unaware of any studies that specifically explore the SSC component of school climate and culture characteristics from a process perspective.

Importantly, having a connection with a caring adult at school, an ally and advocate, may be advantageous for any and all students, and might be particularly critical for students grappling with any number of physical, mental, psychosocial, environmental, or other challenges. Though this example is likely not representative of what most students experience during their school day,

no student should have to endure a toxic climate, and it is not surprising that disconnection from caring adults and disengagement from school would result. The level of integration or ability to *see within, beyond, and between*, revealed by the data in this study, has the potential to alter the space wherein students and staff interact and learn.

In essence, this inquiry aimed to extend existing research by exploring and discovering the mechanisms through which school staff members connect with students in middle school settings. Specifically, the resulting theoretical framework might provide insight into how the SSC process could be enhanced, and what factors need to be addressed for successful SSC processes to take place, so as to combat the substantial faction of middle school students that continue to report feeling disconnected from school and from the adults in their school.

This study, although valuable to schools and school personnel, will be particularly relevant to the discipline of nursing. The study results will have the potential to support nurses working within schools to address student health, including issues such as mental and behavioral health, bullying, emotional distress, somatic complaints, and chronic health conditions, in addition to myriad psychosocial aspects of adolescent health that impact both academic achievement and overall development. By having an in-depth understanding of the SSC process from the perspective of various school personnel, school nurses may lead collaborative efforts to integrate the resulting theoretical model into their own interactions with students, staff-wide trainings, the implementation of school connectedness-related evidence-based practice interventions, or related school policy development. Additionally, nurses engaged in community and public health may recognize the potential for collaborating with schools to address ecological factors influencing the SSC process.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is presented as an integrated whole with two chapters written in manuscript format. The current chapter frames the study while Chapter 2 summarizes the

literature in a way that contextualizes and situates the background for the development of the research question, purpose, and study aims. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth description of the constructivist grounded theory methodology and accompanying methods that guided this study from inception through analysis so as to demonstrate rigor and transparency. The answering of aims one and two evolved into two separate manuscripts, one being more abstract and theoretical and the other more descriptive, presented in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. An integrated discussion of related literature and implications for practice and future research are presented in the final chapter.

As described, Chapter 2 is a literature review that also includes an integration of relevant literature published after the initial pre-study review. As such, this chapter includes historical and current literature and data relevant to adolescent health and wellbeing, social connection science, connectedness and the theoretical frameworks underpinning the research question posed in this study. Literature that was reviewed to compare and contrast with the findings in this study are integrated into the discussion sections of each manuscript presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the rationale for selecting constructivist grounded theory as the methodology for this study, specific details about study procedures and data collection, and a comprehensive description of the analysis process. It also includes a section on rigor, including explication of reflexivity. Although both manuscripts contain pertinent methodological details, there was little room for extensive explanation. Thus, to demonstrate rigor and transparency, I am presenting a full methods chapter.

Chapter 4 is a manuscript, *Cultivating student-staff connections in middle school: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space.* The focus of this chapter is to illuminate the multidimensionality of the space that is created, as well as the intrapersonal processes (those that constitute Creating Space) that underlies and influences the SSC process. This manuscript answers Aim 1 and presents data and analysis related to the overarching core category of Creating

Space, as well as the subcategories (sub-process) labeled as (a) seeing within, beyond and between, (b) embracing our shared humanness, c) equilibrating with empathy and (c) demonstrating relational artistry.

Chapter 5, titled: *Recognizing and Supporting Student-Staff Connection-Building as a Continous Relational Process: Linking Theory and Practice to Promote Connectedness and Healthy Youth Development in Middle School,* address both aims one and two. As anticipated, the study data reveals a consistent, though nuanced, interpersonal SSC process that staff engage in regardless of professional role. Chapter 5 also provides details of the SSC process at the level of praxis and presents factors that participants indicate influence that process. The processes, the abstract and the more concrete, are inextricably linked. Separating the manuscripts by level of abstraction, as well as focusing one on the creation of space through the intrapersonal aspects of staffs' experiences (i.e. Chapter 4) and the other on the interpersonal and extended ecological factors influencing SSC (i.e. Chapter 5), allows for depth, clarity, and differentiation necessary to balance the nuance with the whole.

Lastly, Chapter 6: Synthesis, explicates findings and their relevance for nursing and other allied health and educational professionals. I also discuss implications for practice, limitations, and the potential for future research. Additionally, I reflect on the meaning and situatedness of this research in the current socio-political context.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Note. References from this chapter are included in the comprehensive bibliography

Overview

School connectedness, and in particular, a connection with a caring adult within the school setting, has the potential to be a powerful health asset during adolescence (García-Moya, Brooks, Morgan, & Moreno, 2015). Such connections are known to contribute to the prevention of risk behaviors, enhance academic outcomes and promote healthy, positive youth development. Understanding how such connections develop, with attention to the implicit influence of circumstance and context, from the perspective of caring adults that typically connect with students in schools, might offer critical insights with potential to fuel the promotion of healthy-youth development approaches.

This chapter reviews adolescent health and wellbeing as a global priority, school connectedness, the value and promise of social connection between caring adults and youth in school settings, a rational for the focus of SSC in schools during early adolescence, and an overview of theoretical influence.

Adolescent Health and Wellbeing as a Global Priority

Forty-two percent of our global population is comprised of 3 billion young people under age 25, 1.2 billion of whom are adolescents ages 10-19 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018a). A burgeoning awareness of, and focus on, adolescent health research and health promotion in recent decades adds depth and vision to ongoing prevention and treatment efforts (Kleinert, & Horton, 2016).

Focusing on promoting adolescent health, with intention and resolve, is crucial for promoting peace and wellbeing of humanity and the health of the planet wherein we all reside. Critical to such an endeavor is to (a) envision health and wellbeing as a shared, multisectorial goal, (b) conceptualize health and wellbeing from a strengths and resilience perspective, (c) return to our innate human need and capacity for social connection as a collective asset to be leveraged for health and healing, and (d) reimagining how every person can contribute to

advancing our shared responsibility (reframed in this study as an opportunity, though still a responsibility) of promoting the healthy development of all young people through caring adult-youth (CAY) social connections.

Envisioning adolescent health and wellbeing as a shared multisectorial goal has gained support throughout the world (American Public Health Association [APHA] 2018, Diers, 2013; Patton et al., 2016). Kleinert and Horton (2016) posit "the biggest opportunity during the next 15 years and beyond is to make adolescents the human face of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" (p. 2355; United Nations [UN], n.d.) proposed by the UN's Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). These goals, and strategic guidelines such as the WHO's (n.d.b) Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!) and the Healthy People 2020 (n.d.) objectives, provide scaffolding for and pathways towards health and healing. Concurrently, there is an international movement to focus and capitalize on adolescent health in order to protect prior investments in child health, address the existing gaps in adolescent health and wellbeing, and anticipate the impact of such aims on future generations and the benefit of society as a whole (Patton et al., 2016; Resnick, Catalano, Sawyer, Viner, & Patton, 2012; Sawyer, Afifi, Bearinger, Blakemore, Dick, Ezeh, & Patton, 2012; WHO, 2014). All youth, regardless of who they are, where they live, or where they go to school, deserve to feel safe and connected, not only at home, but also at school and in their communities.

Youth Violence

Youth violence is considered "a global public health problem" by the World Health Organization (2016, para 2) that includes bullying and fighting, as well as more egregious acts such as homicide, sexual and physical assaults (para. 2). Youth violence contributes to considerable costs across criminal justice, welfare and health systems, as well as loss of life, physical and psychological harm, and engagement in a host of risky behaviors that are subsequently associated with numerous deleterious health outcomes (WHO, 2018b). A safe

school environment is essential for learning and health. School violence may manifest in a variety of ways including hate speech, gang activity, threats or acts of physical violence, and bullying, among others (Marin & Brown, 2008). Bullying, verbal, social and/or physical, is a specific type of youth violence defined as "unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance" that is "repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time" (Stopbullying.gov, 2018, para. 1). According to data from the 2015 National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics approximately 21% of U.S. students, ages 12-18, reported bullying experiences (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Stopbullying, 2018). Bullying can negatively impact academic and health outcomes, including mental health problems, substance use and contributing to suicide (Stopbullying.gov, 2017). Bullying-involved adolescents, either as a victim or a perpetrator, report higher levels of depression-related symptoms than youths not involved in bullying (Saluja, Iachan, Scheidt, Overpeck, Sun, & Giedd, 2004).

Mental Health

An estimated 10-20% of adolescents around the world struggle with mental health conditions, often undertreated or underdiagnosed, "accounting for 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10-19 years" (WHO, 2018c, para. 1, key facts). In the U.S. about one in five adolescents have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and almost a third of teens experience symptoms of depression, contributing to suicide which is the nations second leading cause of death for teens (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, 2016). School violence (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2015) and experiences of disrupted health and wellbeing are interrelated and inextricably linked to social determinants of health (SDOH), issues of equity, social disconnection and chronic stress (Currie, et al., 2009; 2012).

Disengagement/Disconnection from School

Feeling disconnected from school and potentially disengaging is complex and ecologically situated, but critical to understand and address in order to holistically support and promote adolescent health. Disengagement is one of many antecedent factors implicated in school dropout, and school dropout is a critical public health issue warranting the attention of health professionals (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Despite existing recommendations of how to keep students connected with school (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2009a,b), as well as the identification of educational and health interventions that have the potential to contribute to improving engagement, academics, graduation, and youth health outcomes by extension (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007), students continue to be disengaged due to a variety of environmental and interpersonal factors, one of which may be that critical connections with caring adults are not available or are in some way hindered in their school setting.

Measures of engagement vary, however, in terms of feeling connected to adults at school, local state-level data, specific to students' perceptions of connections with teachers, reveals that almost a third of students in Minnesota disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that "most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person" (Minnesota Department of Health [MDH], 2013). Additionally, the 2013 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) data for the aforementioned survey question indicates a notable difference between 5th grade and 8th grade student results with 13% versus 31% of students, respectively, indicating they disagree or strongly disagree that their teachers are interested in them as a person (MDH, 2013). Furthermore, there continues to be a gap between the research supporting the value of SSC and the translation of this knowledge into practice, and ultimately improved health outcomes and healthy youth development. The decline of perceived teacher interest is indicative of a lack of connection, and addressing this during or before middle school, when data indicates disconnection might become more prevalent, is critical. The persistence of youth

disconnectedness to adults in school warrants further investigation, particularly in light of data documenting youths' developmental needs (i.e., "students need to feel that adults care about them as individuals as well as about their academic achievement" CDC, 2009b, p. 6; Resnick et al., 1997), the protective nature of school connectedness, and the myriad evidence-based practice (EBP) recommendations for engaging and connecting with students.

Linking Violence, Behavioral and Mental Health and Disengagement in Schools

Nationally, 8.1% of youth reported engaging in physical fighting at school, 19.6% were bullied at school, and 14.8% were bullied electronically, sometime during the previous year (Kann et al., 2014). Within the 12 months prior to the survey, 29.9% of students across the United States reported feeling so sad or hopeless every day for more than two weeks that it significantly disrupted their usual activities (Kann et al., 2014). The 8th-grade 2013 Minnesota Student Survey results revealed that 14% of students reported suicidal ideation, and 26% reported depressive symptoms or hopelessness, while approximately one third reported being victims of relational bullying (MDH, 2013). Lastly, the interconnectedness of bullying and mental health is exemplified by a study of more than 1800 middle and high school students from which findings showed that students who experienced bullying, compared to those that did not, had significantly higher levels of both depression and suicidal ideation (Turner, Exum, Brame & Holt, 2013). School violence, behavioral and mental health, and disconnection or disengagement from school are serious public health concerns impacting adolescents and society. Relatedly, the American Public Health Association (APHA, 2018) recently published *Chronic Stress and the Risk of High School DropOut*, stating "the relationship between health and education is fluid and reciprocal" (p. 2), linking graduation, SDOHs, equity-related issues, adverse childhood events (ACEs) and other contributors of chronic stress, to health using a life course, developmental and neurobiological perspective. Tending to potential disengagement, including identifying students at risk and the potential for interventions during the middle-school years, is critical because of the

impact disengagement has on graduation rates (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007), and ultimately their health and developmental trajectories.

Addressing such adolescent health issues is often complex and requires a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach. Despite this complexity, school connectedness, and in particular a connection with a caring adult, is one promising factor that offers protection for youth against many concerning health behaviors and outcomes that impact adolescents (Benard & Slade, 2009; McNeely et al., 2002; Resnick, Harris & Blum, 1993; Resnick et al., 1997). In fact, Hawkins et al. (2015) state

> Behavioral health problems now surpass communicable diseases as the country's most pressing concerns for the wellbeing of our young people. Over 30 years of evidence shows that advances in prevention and promotion research have transformative potential to prevent problems before they develop. Now our challenge is to broadly implement these recent discoveries – developing and delivering on their potential through programs and policies that reach all young people. . . . Given its proven ability to dramatically reduce a wide range of behavioral health problems and save billions of dollars year after year, prevention is one of our nation's most valuable – and underused – resources. It's time to unleash the power of prevention – creating programs, training and infrastructure that put prevention to work nationwide for all young people, and yielding results in healthier lives, families, communities and economies. (p. 22)

Health, Wellbeing, Resilience and Relationships

Although attention to solving urgent public health issues is critical, doing so from a strengths and resilience perspective offers a forward-thinking and holistic approach. Health, often thought of as physical health or the absence of illness, is indeed a bio-psycho-social concept that is but one component of overall wellbeing. Wellbeing, defined as an alignment between the

body, mind and spirit, is a multidimensional concept comprised of health, relationships, security, environment, community, and purposes (Center for Spirituality and Healing [CSPH], n.d.); one that we have as an innate proclivity for as humans. Resilience, then is in our nature; it is a strength to remember and draw upon at anytime as we move towards a balanced state of wellbeing. Importantly, wellbeing has recently been recognized as “a metric that is garnering attention” applied across ecological levels from individuals to nations (CSPH, n.d.; Kreitzer, 2016, p. 3). From this strengths-based perspective, Kreitzer (2016) boldly poses the questions:

> Which priorities would rise to the top and which investments would we make if wellbeing and human flourishing became a strategic priority as well as a policy imperative? Which decisions could we be making today that would lead to higher levels of wellbeing and human flourishing for present as well as future generations? (p. 3)

Moreover, conceptualizing health and wellbeing from a strengths and resilience perspective is critical not only for healthcare, but across systems and sectors. Health and wellbeing may be a critical and unifying aim across sectors and nations, and in particular provide guidance for promoting healthy development during adolescence. Brindis (2005) specifically calls for health and education sector collaboration as a means to enhancing population health. Of particular value is exploring the relationship dimension of wellbeing (CSPH, n.d.; Kreitzer, 2016) and the power of such social connections, especially those at school, on health and wellbeing during adolescence.

Sometimes referred to as relationships, social connections are a universal contributor to health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017; Seppala, 2014), even being posited as a “public health priority” due to the surge in scientific findings indicating its significance as a powerful health determinant (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017, p.517). People that feel socially connected have increased levels of self-

esteem, are more empathetic, trusting and cooperative, and experience less anxiety and depression; moreover "social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional, and physical well being" (Seppala, 2014, infographic). In fact, results from a recent national study exploring bidirectional relationship of social connectedness and mental health, asserts that the "psychological resources conferred by social connectedness" has the potential to "act as a 'social cure' for psychological ill-health" (Saeri, Cruwys, Barlow, Stronge, & Sibley, 2018, p. 365). Social connectedness intersects with and contributes to health and wellbeing throughout the lifecourse, but is particularly critical and malleable during the transitional developmental period of adolescence.

Schools are an ideal setting to encourage such prevention and health promotion efforts. Finding ways in which to prevent school violence, feelings of disconnection from school, and the potential for dropout, while supporting mental health and wellbeing during adolescents should be a priority for our schools and society as a whole. In short "relationships matter" (Klem & Connell, 2004, p.262), and as Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) describe, student-teacher connectedness is "a significant health asset" (p. 641). School connectedness is a construct that crosses health and education boundaries and is recognized, in this study, as being situated within the broader domain of social connection science.

School Connectedness

Decades of adolescent health-focused connectedness studies in school contexts include exploring a sense of belongingness and connection to a school community, often labeled broadly as school connectedness, and the social connections with peers and teachers. Foundational to this area of research is data from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health (Resnick, et al., 1997). A sense of connectedness to school and to extra-familial adults, in addition to parents and family, are buffers against numerous risky behaviors and promote healthy youth development despite gender, racial or ethnic differences (Resnick et al., 1997).

The concept of school connectedness has been described using various terms such as school engagement, school bonding, school climate, and teacher support, among others (Libbey, 2004). The CDC (2015) concisely describes school connectedness as “the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 1). Similarly, the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections (WDSC) defines school connection as “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 233; Blum, 2005). The WDSC also offers criteria for creating connectedness in schools, a summary of related student academic and health outcomes including school violence and emotional distress, and suggestions for future research (Blum, 2005), yet to date there is still no one agreed upon definition (GarcÍa-Moya, Bunn, Jiménez-Iglesias, Paniagua, & Brooks (2018). There is no one word or phrase that incorporates all of the constructs (see school connectedness review by Libbey, 2004). More recently, GarcÍa-Moya, et al. (2018) summarized their review, again noting that there was no universally accepted definition used for school connectedness, and in many relevant studies, no definition used at all. Among those who did provide definitions, the common aspects of school connectedness definitions were that they indicated relationships were occurring in the school setting and recognized students *perceptions* of the relationship was critical (Garcia et al., 2018, p.14). The CDC (2009) describes key factors that influence school connectedness, including; (a) adult support; (b) positive peer groups; (c) a commitment to education; and (d) the school climate or environment. Of these four factors, it has been noted that “the relationships formed between students and school staff members are at the heart of school connectedness” (Safe Supportive Learning, 2016, p. 1). Also, developing trusting relationships and ensuring every student has a connection with at least one caring adult at school are recommended strategies for enhancing youths’ school connectedness (Blum, 2005). GarcÍa-Moya, et al. (2018) also found, in a scoping review aimed at analyzing definitions and measures for school and teacher connectedness in extant literature, that “relationships in the school

environment seem to be the core element shared by all definitions of school connectedness", noting "students' perceptions (feelings, beliefs, sense of)" as common across definitions (p. 6).

Peer relationships are critical during adolescence, often recognized as being a vital aspect of school connectedness, not all students will have a strong peer network, nor will the peer group necessarily promote positive outcomes and healthy relationships (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Brendgen & Troop-Gorden, 2015); however, students' connections to caring adults has been demonstrated to be protective for all youth. Additionally, peer groups are likely more difficult to change, whereas focusing on the organizational, leadership and staff-level climate and culture within schools offer more concrete pathways to enhancing connectedness. Brendgen and Troop-Gordon (2015) suggest that teachers have a significant role as "socializing agents who can enculturate anti-bullying attitudes and discourage bullying behaviors" and more generally have a notable impact on "peer ecology" within their classrooms (p. 3). Developing trusting relationships and making sure that each student has a connection with at least one caring adult at school are two of the recommended strategies for increasing school connectedness (Blum, 2005).

Student-staff connections. In alignment with recommendation by Garcia-Moya et al. (2018) to "unpack school connectedness into its different components" (p. 18), the focus of this study is specifically aimed at student-staff connections (SSC) so as to be inclusive of any and all school staff, not only teachers. Broadly, childrens' and adolescents' experiences of CAY connections begin at home, with an increase of CAYs outside the home as youth development progresses.

> The role of parents continues to be important through adolescence and young adulthood, although the range and depth of parental control change as children work out the developmental challenge of indi-viduation (Smetana, 2011) and extend their life space to more complex engagement in social fields that include school, peers, and work. (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018, p. 6)

Connections with caring adults in any extrafamilial context can be considered a connection and might or might not evolve more deeply into a developmental relationship by expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power and expanding possibilities (Search, 2018b). Since there is no common definition of teacher-connectedness (Garcia-Moya et al., 2018), or CAY connectedness, I drew from nursing and education literature. For the purpose of this study, SSC was defined as:

> … a close, intimate, meaningful and significant relationship with another person or group of people. This perception is characterized by positive expressions (i.e. empathy, belonging, caring, respect and trust) that are both received and reciprocated, either by the person or between people, through affective and consistent social interactions (Phillips-Salimi et al. 2012, p. 235).

This definition of connectedness is presented as a way to be transparent about my own position; however, consistent with grounded theory, the perspectives and experiences of study participants will likely shape a description of SSC fitting for the emerging theory.

Youth-adult relationships in school are just one component of overall school connectedness which influences, and is influenced by, broader school climate. To fully appreciate and explore the complexity of SSC, it is crucial to recognize that it exists within, and is reciprocally related to, multiple ecological levels. A cornerstone of a healthy school climate, and perceived positive school connectedness, is adult support and the connections between school staff and students (Thapa, Cohen, Higgins-D'Alessandro, & Guffey, 2013). Engagement, as a student behavior, is influenced by school-based social relationships, which includes student-teacher relationships, and the sense of connectedness students feel in their school setting (Juvonen, 2007).

Contextualizing SSCs: School climate and culture. School connectedness and connections with caring adults in school, are inextricably linked to the climate and culture of the

institutions wherein they occur and so are presented here as a way to contextualize connectedness. School culture and climate are distinct yet important conceptualizations of the environment in which adolescents spend many hours of their lives. Gruenert (2008) offers some simple, colloquial phrasing that further differentiates between the concepts of school climate and school culture, describing climate as "the way we feel around here" and culture as "the way we do things around here" (p. 58). School *culture* is more formally defined as a reflection of shared values, beliefs and ideas that set behavior standards and shape the identity of an organization (Tableman & Herron, 2004). Although there is not consensus on one concrete definition of school *climate*, in an extensive review of school climate literature (Thapa et al., 2013) suggest using the National School Climate Council [NSCC] definition. School climate is a socio-environmental construct that reflects the patterns of people's experiences of school life and the "norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures" of a school (NSCC, 2007, p. 1).

Engagement, safety, and environment constitute the three main components of school climate, with interpersonal relationships being a key element of engagement (Youth.gov, n.d.a). Climate can also be described as the "attitude or mood" of an organization, which is more flexible and amenable to change since it is based primarily on perceptions; whereas culture is the "personality" of an organization, based on values and beliefs, and can take years for change to occur (Gruenert, 2008). These distinctions are important to understand because they influence the way school culture and/or climate has been examined in the existing body of knowledge. Gruenert (2008) states, "an organization's culture dictates its collective personality"; therefore, an understanding of the differences and commonalities between culture and climate could offer a more defined approach to addressing desired school changes (p. 57); yet, Sergiovanni (1991) suggests that culture can be conceptualized as a metaphor, and that although experts may have differing onions about whether or not schools actually have cultures, "the issue is less the reality

of culture and more what can be learned by thinking about schools as cultures" by way of "symbols, behavioral regularizes, ceremonies, and even myths" that communicate shared values and beliefs (p. 3). Many aspects of school climate and culture, in addition to external ecological and internal bio-psycho-social forces, impact adolescents' experiences, and SSC is only one, albeit remarkably powerful, element in the web of interrelated influences impacting adolescent health. However, connectedness is an essential part of our human experience, and relationships are "the basic building blocks of life" (Wheatley, 2008, p. 1).

School connectedness is consistently recognized in the literature as "an important construct in the community or relationships domain of school climate (Garcia-Moya et al., 2018, p. 18). Thus, a focused exploration of connected relationships between students and caring adults at school, is one aspect of school culture that warrants further research. Further, exploring the broader SSC component of school culture, while recognizing the related micro-level aspects of school climate, offers valuable insight into how culture and climate interact with respect to student-staff relationships. Inquiry into, and measurement of, both school climate and connectedness is a challenging, yet worthy, endeavor that is critical to efforts aimed at informing students, their families and school staff about the ways in which school environments can be improved (Wilson, 2004).

Health, wellbeing and academic outcomes associated with school connectedness. The relational aspect of school connectedness, contributing to and influenced by school climate and culture, is associated with enhanced academic achievement, psychological adjustment, and healthy development overall (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). For example, despite the complexities of school ecology and the variability of definitions and measures of school climate and school violence, Steffgen, Recchia, and Viechtbauer (2013) found, through a meta analysis of 36 studies, a moderate effect size suggesting school violence can be prevented by modifying the school environment. Connectedness with school and caring adults in school is associated with

lower levels of violence perpetration at school (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004). Additionally, Guerra (2003) suggests one of the most valuable support schools can offer students, with a goal of curbing school violence and promoting wellbeing, is the opportunity to engage in "trusting and caring relationships" with both peers and adults alike (p. 149). In a data analyses aimed at investigating the relationship between school climate and connectedness with violent aggression and victimization, Wilson (2004) found that students with high levels of connectedness, regardless of the school climate were less likely to perpetrate or be victims of violence when compared to students with lower levels of connectedness. McNeely and Falci (2004) found that support by teachers provides protection against a number of health-risk behaviors, including a potential reversal for student involvement in violence. This is yet another example of how caring adults in schools can enhance the development of resilience and promote health and wellbeing in students. Indeed, youth who report being connected to school in some way, *and* feeling supported by teachers, have better academic and health outcomes than their counterparts (Libbey, 2004), including lower rates of emotional distress (Shochet, et al., 2006), a lower likelihood of perpetrating or committing violence in school (Wilson, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004), and better social/emotional and academic outcomes (Murray-Harvey, 2010). Thus, there is an established link between healthy youth development and students' connections with caring adults in their school.

Early Adolescence as an Opportune Developmental Stage

Early adolescence, ages 10 to 14, is a stage during which significant physical, sexual, emotional cognitive and moral changes occur (McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). This is also one of the "key transition points" of human development during which "development is progressing at such a fast pace that development itself becomes a central component of health" (Blum, Astone, Decker, & Mouli, 2014, p. 321). In addition to rapid shifts in physiologic, cognitive and psychological development, early adolescents seek meaning, purpose and self-identity within an

ever-expanding social context. The exploration for identity occurs during a time in which early adolescents' family, social and environmental contexts may be changing as they transition to middle or secondary school settings, seeking independence from their parents or caregivers, increasing connections with caring adults outside of their family, and focusing on developing social peer relationships (Eccles, 1999; McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). Adolescence is often characterized by experimentation and risk-taking, more recently understood to be a normative process linked to adolescent brain development; but more importantly, it is a time during which teens experience an expanding awareness of health and an increased capacity for abstract thinking (WHO, 2014). Thus, early adolescence is a critical period for healthy youth development efforts to be implemented as a way to promote adolescent health and wellbeing in the present and with a life-course perspective (WHO, 2014). A successful transition from dependence on the family unit to increased independence in school, including developing extra-familial social relationships, is critical to adolescents' health trajectories. Also recognizing the transition to adolescence as "a second period of rapid growth and foundational learning associated with a distinct neuro-maturational changes" (Dahl, Allen, Wilbrecht, & Suleiman, 2018, p. 2) supports the reframing of adolescence as "a period of social-affective engagement and goal flexibility" (Crone & Dahl, 2012, p. 636). A positive reframing honors a shift in perspective of adolescents going through a risky period of development, to one that has, over time,

> favored a slightly different cognitive style (more flexible, exploratory and sensitive to social-affective influences) compared with adults. This notion argues against the idea that the adult brain is the optimal or 'normal' functional system and that differences during adolescent development represents 'deficits'. (Crone & Dahl, 2012, p. 648)

As such, the rationale for the focus on middle school settings in this study is based on early adolescence being a pivotal developmental stage that influences lifelong health and

wellbeing and it is a period during which adolescents spend a significant amount of time in schools with adults. At the same time, the reality of schools, and the systems they are situated in, are complex. Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) describe the challenges teachers face with increasing class sizes and the focus on standardized test outcomes:

> Sadly, many adults who were initially drawn to the teaching profession out of a desire to establish meaningful connections with their students have become increasingly disillusioned by the structural impediments to relationships in schools. Supportive bonds become even less practical as students move into middle and high school and no longer have a primary teacher with whom they spend most of the day. (p. 51)

The transition to middle school, and into puberty, can negatively influence school outcomes, however, this can be offset by higher numbers of health assets, and not surprisingly, "good health may buffer children from the potentially negative effects of school and pubertal transitions on academic success as children enter adolescence" (Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, & Louis, 2013, p. 1).

Theoretical Influences

Historically, grounded theory methodologists are discouraged from doing extensive literature reviews or initiating a study using an existing explanatory framework so as to avoid contaminating the data and grounded theory development with preconceived ideas (Charmaz, 2014). While I was committed to discovering a process of SSC using grounded theory, it was inevitable that I would approach the study using my exposure to, and orientation towards, social-ecological models, healthy and positive youth development frameworks, and resilience.

Social-Ecological Theory

Although there are multiple iterations of ecological models based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original social-ecological theory on human development, the WHO's (2014) determinants

of adolescent health and development ecological model, comprised of individual, interpersonal, community, organizational, environmental, structural and macro levels of ecology, generally informs how I think about connectedness. This model is structured around adolescent health and development and specifically includes interpersonal interactions between youth and teachers, as well as the role of school climate, as determinants of and contributors to health (WHO, 2014). Given the context of this study is the school setting, school-specific ecological models were integral to my orientation in this study, a way to acknowledge the school culture and climate related to SSC. Specifically, Waters et al. (2009) theoretical model explaining "the social and ecological structures supporting adolescent connectedness to school" (p. 516) offers both a theoretical support for the value of enhancing student connectedness to schools, including the importance of SSC, and the components within schools that likely influence connectedness.

Resilience

Myriad research studies, across disciplines, have suggested that connectedness is not only part of human nature, but supports resilience (Benard & Slade, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997), which, according to Masten, "arises from 'ordinary magic'" (2014a, p. 148). Resilience has been defined broadly as "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" (Masten, 2014b, p. 6), and more specifically from a positive youth development (PYD) perspective as "a dynamic attribute referencing the adaptive and mutually influential relation of an individual adolescent and that person's context" (Masten, 2014b, p.1018 citing Lerner et al, 2013, p. 203). From a nursing perspective, Ahern (2006) defines adolescent resilience as "the process of adaptation to risk that incorporates personal characteristics, family and social support, and community resources" (p. 181). The value of effective schools and "close relationships with other capable adults" is a critical factor associated with resilience for young people (Masten, 2014a, p. 148).

One particular framework, The Youth Development Process: Resilience in Action framework created by Benard & Slade (2009), has influenced my worldview as it combines resilience theory and a healthy youth development framework through an ecological lens. The framework begins with the caregiver's belief in resilience (Benard & Slade, 2009), which in this study caregiver refers to any adult in the school setting. It includes environmental and individual inputs, individual outputs and two key social impacts labeled as positive prevention and educational outcomes with a focus on the "innate resilience" that exists within every young person (Benard & Slade, 2009, p. 355). This theoretical framework has even been applied to develop a Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM) consisting of questions about external assets, including caring relationships, internal assets such as empathy and self-awareness, that have been added to the existing California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) given to students in 5th, 7th, 9th and 11th grades.

Positive and Healthy Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Healthy Youth Development (HYD) are both frameworks aimed at enhancing youth development with slightly different foci, that of overall positive development and the other aimed at healthy development and wellbeing of youth, both with attention to individual assets and external influential factors.

Positive youth development. PYD is an amalgam of positive experiences, relationships and environments, defined by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs as,

> an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths. (Youth.gov, n.d.b, para. 1).

Originating in the prevention science sphere, and evolving over time from singularly problem focused (e.g. substance use, delinquency, adolescent pregnancy) to recognizing youths' assets, resiliency and the role of environmental factors, now includes a focus on promoting protective factors such as family support, positive peer groups, caring adults, school engagement, self-esteem, among others, linking a diversity of these protective factors to positive outcomes (Youth.gov, n.d.b). Seeing youth as assets in and of themselves, as well as recognizing the potential for enhancing known environmental and intrapersonal protective factors, is PYD in action. Masten (2014b) provides an extensive historical discussion and comparison of PYD and resilience science, and Ahern, Ark, and Byers (2008) offers a review of adolescent resilience, as well as potential coping strategies from a nursing perspective and with nursing implications.

Healthy youth development. HYD strategies are grounded in the premise that youth are 'resources to be developed, rather than problems to be solved'" (Bernat & Resnick, 2006, p. 810 quoting McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). HYD science also evolved out of resilience research and moving beyond risk factors to include protective factors, with HYD strategies being defined as "the deliberate process for providing all youth with the support, relationships, experiences, resources, and opportunities needed to become successful and competent as adults" (Bernat & Resnick, 2006, p. S10). Blum (1998) offers a helpful multidimensional visual grid that displays an interweaving of risk (e.g. stress, life events, critical transitions, etc.) and resilience (e.g. cognitive, school and social functioning), their relation to outcomes including mental health and behavioral problems as well as functional and social competencies (See Figure 1. p. 372).

Gaps Addressed in this Study

There are no studies, to my knowledge, qualitatively exploring multi-disciplinary staff perspectives on how they connect with students. Understanding the processes through which caring adults in school settings connect with students could provide clarity around what they do and map how they do what they do, with the aim of developing meaningful connection with

students as an immediate outcome, providing insight for potential points of intervention in the process, and the myriad ripple-effect outcomes that impact social-emotional learning (SEL), academics, health and wellbeing.

Student reports of feeling connected to adults in their schools are lagging in the extant research, indicating a gap somewhere between research supporting the value of SSC and the translation of this knowledge into practice and policy (Cohen, 2012). SSC is a critical factor among many of the interrelated socio-environmental influences on adolescent health. To date much school connectedness research, often embedded in school climate measures, has been student survey-based and quantitative in nature (Bond et al., 2007; Murray-Harvey, 2010; Resnick et al., 1997; Wilson, 2004). Quantitative data alone does not provide the contextual and tacit knowledge that can only be explored using qualitative methodologies. Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, and Varga (2016) addressed this in their mixed-method study focused on exploring youths' experiences of connections with nonparental adults and the link to PYD. They acknowledge extant research provides support for a link between positive outcomes and youth-adult relationships, but aimed to gain further understand from adolescents perspectives, about how "they feel connected to important adults," as well as behaviors on the part of the youth or the adults that support such connections (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016). Lastly, they describe connection as "both an asset that youth have and a process in which they engage" ultimately necessitating different approaches to measurement (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016, p. 61). There is also a call for more qualitative research to investigate PYD-related phenomena (i.e. student-staff connectedness), and specifically exploring processes in addition to outcomes (Futch Ehrlich, 2016). Existing connectedness research, then, indicates a need for nuanced learning about SSC via qualitative methods, gathering data from school staff members, and exploring SSC from a process-oriented perspective, in hopes of discovering a theoretically actionable understanding of the process by which school staff connect with their students.

Some qualitative work exploring school connectedness has been reported in the literature. As described within the Resilience section above, Benard & Slade's (2009) The Youth Development Process: Resilience in Action framework, which was applied to develop a Resilience and Youth Development Module (RYDM), contributed to the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) survey. The results of the data were then used by the Safe and Healthy Kids Program in California as an aid for schools to address the identified needs of their school; however, instead of creating a list of strategic approaches for each school, a facilitated student-staff listening circle approach was used to give students a voice, while allowing staff to listen to their thoughts and concerns related to the survey data. It is structured so that students are in the center circle with staff observing from an outer circle, as responded to questions like how did they know an adult at school cared about them. The results were then turned into school-specific recommendations. This model gives students voice and recognizes the value of listening as a 'turnaround' practice, which is a simple concept for adults in any setting to consider when attempting to connect with youth (Benard & Slade, 2009). This is one of only a few qualitative reports in the reviewed literature that offer a significant amount of data exploring the nuances of school connectedness, among other topics, through more than 100 listening circle with students, staff and community partners (Benard & Slade, 2009). Although this was primarily focused on giving voice to the youth, the staff were integrated into the study as a community of listeners.

Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, and Shochet (2014) attempted to address the lack of teacher and staff perspectives around the relationship of school connectedness and adolescent risk behaviors, not surprisingly finding that teachers indeed perceived positive student-teacher relationships as potentially preventing risky behaviors. Similar to my proposed study, but from a teaching and learning perspective, is Sands' (2011) grounded theory study aimed at understanding the process of teacher-student relationship development, "the process by which teacher-student relationships evolve in middle school" (p. 158), using student and teacher

interviews and brief teacher observation data in one Tennessee middle school. The study resulted in Sands' proposal of a six stage model labeled as "Student-Teacher Relationships: Transactional to Transformational". The model begins with the transaction of teachers presenting and students receiving content and then moving through a process of increasingly reciprocated levels of care and trust culminating in "transformational interdependent engagement" which manifested as a high-level academic and interpersonal relationship wherein teachers and students learn together (Sands, 2011, p. 159). Essentially, the study revealed that the process of teacher-student relationship development in a middle school classroom exists on, and moves through, a continuum from "transactional independent engagement" (i.e. "basic relationships that simply exchange information") to transformational interdependent engagement (i.e. a state of reciprocity characterized by "higher order mutually satisfying relationships between teachers and students) (p. 159-160) and is based on "trust, mutual engagement, and willingness to relate interpersonally with one another" (p. 173). Importantly, Sands (2011) found that in addition to trust, the motivation levels of both teachers and students were influential in this process.

Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, and Wright (2012) report on their grounded theory study exploring the relational processes between a 5th grade teacher, known for her cultural responsiveness, and a class of African-American students, found that emotional connectedness (i.e. "interactions that fostered a sense of attachment and emotional bonding between the teacher and the students") is an essential component in the development of teacher-student relationships and as a facilitator of student learning. Their study revealed emotional connectedness was the main relational dimension, which includes concepts similar to those found in this study (i.e. "attending to" and "believing in" individual students and the class, "reengaging individual students", "ensuring" student and class success, "using knowledge & culture", "being transparent and joining" by "voicing thought processes", "sharing imperfections", and "being playful" (Cholewa, et al., 2012, p. 256). Their study provides important insights, yet was focused on

teacher-student relationship processes within one classroom and was based in a more academically oriented teaching and learning paradigm. In a post-study review of the literature I also found Schubert and Lionberger's (1995) grounded theory study, from a nursing perspective, focused on the client-nurse relationship and pointing to the creation of a "caring environment", a "mutual connectedness", in addition to nursing actions within the relationship and ultimately describe the resulting "healing" as "the process of self-transformation during which latent potential is realized" (p. 109). Thus, there is space for further exploration of relational processes between students and staff throughout the school setting, with richness from approaching it through a nursing lens.

My study is both distinct from and complementary to the aforementioned studies as it includes (a) a healthy youth development approach, as opposed to a primary focus on teaching and learning; (b) multiple types of school personnel rather than only focusing on teacher-student relationships in the classroom; (c) a more extensive observation component of data collection; (d) the use of an ecological framework in an attempt to recognize and contextualize factors that may influence SSC; and (e) an attempt to gain a grounded, nuanced understanding of the intricacies of the SSC process from school staff members' perspectives before launching into more comprehensive theorizing that would include student perspectives, as would be appropriate in a future study. Though there has been some attempt to investigate student relationships with school personnel using qualitative methodologies, to my knowledge there has not been an attempt to explore the process through which school staff members, in varying positions (e.g., teacher, coach, counselor, nurse) and across multiple middle schools in one district, go about connecting with students. In addition, my study is unique in that I, as the primary investigator, approach these questions from a constructivist grounded theory and nursing research approach. I open-mindedly, and without the guidance of any particular theory, entered into data collection and analysis. I

acknowledged my background as a nurse, undeniably influenced by my personal, practical experience and the aforementioned theoretical orientations.

Chapter 3

Research Design & Methodology

Note. References from this chapter are included in the comprehensive bibliography

Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to the study design methodology and an overview of the methods employed to meet the study aims. Next, it provides data collection and other procedural details, analytic descriptions, and attention to reflexivity and rigor.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the process, including related influencing factors, that school staff members from varying roles go through as they connect with students in middle school settings. This qualitative study used a constructivist grounded theory design, primarily guided by Charmaz (2014) but also significantly influenced by Corbin and Strauss (2008), to address these specific aims:

(a) to develop an interpretive theoretical model, grounded in the perspectives and experiences of school staff members, about the process of student-staff connectedness in middle schools, and

(b) to identify factors at multiple ecological levels that school staff members perceive as integral to effective student-staff connectedness processes.

There is a paucity of research specifically exploring the caring adult-youth (CAY) connection process in schools, particularly studies aimed at an in-depth exploration of this social process from the perspective of staff members interacting with students through various roles. The research question posed is one of process: *What is the theoretical process, and the related influential ecological factors, through which school staff members connect with students in middle school settings?.* The process(es) explored are uniquely situated in a school context that is undeniably co-created with students and others, and is inextricably linked to and influenced by an expansive list of ecological influences. As such, grounded theory was selected as a fitting study design. Being a novice researcher, my first impression of grounded theory was that it was distant and inaccessible; however, throughout the journey of narrowing my research focus and honing in

on what I wanted to explore, the research question that emerged was one best answerable by grounded theory methods. Thus, my personal and academic odyssey in the world of grounded theory began.

Navigating Constructivist Grounded Theory as a Methodology

First, I grappled with the logistics of understanding: what is grounded theory? Charmaz (2014) describes it as a “rigorous method of conducting research in which researchers construct conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive theoretical analyses from data and subsequently checking their theoretical interpretations” (p. 343). More simply, it is a grouping of research methods, most often used in qualitative research, but also in mixed-methods, that are “systematic, yet flexible” through which “researchers construct a theory ‘grounded’ in their data” (Charmaz, 2014, p.2), or as Creswell (2013) explains “the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action or an interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (p. 83). Originating from the work of Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, published in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), this methodology emerged during a time of historical qualitative and quantitative divide among researchers and academicians (see Charmaz, 2014 for an in-depth historical summary), ultimately offering “a powerful argument that legitimized qualitative research as a credible - and rigorous - methodological approach in its own right rather than simply as a precursor for developing quantitative instruments” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 8). Eventually Glaser’s and Strauss’s differing philosophical orientations, positivism and pragmatism respectively, became divisive as Strauss embraced his symbolic interactionist roots moving from Glaser’s “dispassionate empiricism” and “rigorous codified methods” bringing “notions of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings, problem-solving practices, and the open-ended study of action” to grounded theory (Charmzaz, 2014, p. 9). Constructivist grounded theory then emerged in the early 1990s

embracing aspects of both traditions while addressing critiques and criticisms of existing forms of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), as described in the following statement:

> Researchers can use grounded theory strategies without endorsing mid-century assumptions of an objective external reality, a passive, neutral observer, or a detached, narrow empiricism. If, instead, we start with the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It, too, is a construction. (Charmaz, p. 13).

With further exploration of the literature, reflecting on my own professional nursing experience and training, as well as the context within which I would be doing the research, my ontological and epistemological orientation was most aligned with a constructivist approach to conducting grounded theory research; thus, the decision to utilize Charmaz (2014) as a guide.

Of note, throughout this dissertation I refer to and understand methodology as "a way of thinking about and studying social phenomena" and methods as "techniques and procedures for gathering and analyzing data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). I differentiate the two because they are often confused and there is some debate about grounded theory being a methodology, or simply a grouping of methods (Charmaz, 2017, p. 7). As such, for the purposes of this research, I describe this study as using qualitative, constructivist methodology and methods. Though some researchers may use a sampling of grounded theory methods, I followed the core tenets as closely as possible from design selection through the end-stage writing of this dissertation, so I label this as a qualitative grounded theory study. The following strategies are what I used throughout this doctoral research process:

1. Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process
2. Analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structure
3. Use comparative methods

4. Draw on data (e.g. narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories
5. Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis
6. Engage in theoretical sampling
7. Search for variation in the studied categories or process
8. Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic

(Charmaz, 2014, p. 15)

While attempting to systematically tend to these, and other constructivist grounded theory strategies, I found some solace, freedom and inspiration in Corbin and Strauss's (2008) statement that "techniques and procedures are tools, not directives" and analysis "should be relaxed, flexible, and driven by insight gained through interactions with data rather than being overly structured and based only on procedures" (p. 12). Grounded theory, then, is "a way to learn about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to understand them" and assumes that "neither data nor theories are discovered either as given in the data or the analysis. Rather, we construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (Charmaz, 2014, p.17). Ultimately, such methods of inquiry, analysis and theorizing might aid in nuanced understandings of process or practices and possibly provide insights towards future research (Creswell, 2013), which is certainly desirable and advantageous when attempting to understand, particularly from a nursing worldview, the phenomenon of SSCs occurring in middle-school contexts.

Setting

The initial study proposal aimed to solicit participation from two middle schools in the same school district that met the following criteria:

(a) situated in an urban or first ring suburban school district,

(b) differing in size, and

(c) each school would agree to provide access to any related policies or other documents.

As is typical in research, study site selection is not always as simple as finding sites that meet the set criteria. In this case, I became aware of, through another research project I assisted with as a doctoral student, a potential school district to approach. The district is in a Midwestern metropolitan area near where I was enrolled in a doctoral program and contained multiple middle schools spread across varying communities. I inquired with local friends and colleagues to find any leadership contacts at the district middle schools. I found leadership connections to three of the four, and engaged the administrators individually, as well as a director with the district's Research, Evaluation and Assessment department. Through this process I was informed that two schools would be willing and able to participate in this study. They were indeed in the same district, differed in size (i.e. school A had just under 700 students; school B had approximately 1200 students), with differing student populations, and were willing to provide any related documents if requested. School A, the smaller school, had a ratio of all licensed staff to students of 12, whereas school B had a ratio of 15. The schools were slightly different demographically by race/ethnicity and special population. Students identified as Hispanic or Latino (12% and 15%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (0.1% and 0.4%), Asian (7.6% and 6.4%), Black or African-American (7.6% and 5.4%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (0.1% and 0%), White (65.2% and 72.3%), and two or more races (7.2% and 6.9%), schools A and B respectively. As for special populations, schools A and B respectively, 40.2% compared to 21.8% free/reduced lunch, 6.2% and 3.6% English learners, 17.5% versus 11.1% special education, and 2.2% and 0.6% identified as homeless. The manuscripts from Chapters 4 and 5 in this dissertation provide further site-specific demographics.

Participants

A cursory literature review indicated that existing studies related to staff perspectives on SSC focus only on teacher perspectives, indicating a gap in understanding and a value to

expanded inclusion to staff members in multiple roles. This study invited participants throughout the school setting, including administrative staff, school nurses or health office support staff, social workers, counselors, psychologists, teachers, paraprofessionals in any role, cafeteria school resource officers, or other student-guidance staff. The inclusion criteria for participants were:

- working in or with a participating middle school;
- having consistent, direct interactions with students that attend that school;
- having worked professionally with students for at least one year;
- willing to participate in at least one, but possibly two, in-person interviews each estimated to be between 45 and 60 minutes long, with a limit of 90 minutes;
- agree to be observed/shadowed in their work environment for 3-4 hours on two separate occasions (the observations focused on the interaction with students in their general practice or as they move about the school building during typical daily activities, and are not to include private or confidential student meeting.);
- consider participating in a brief follow-up email or phone call (member checking) near the end of the study to assist in clarifying the study findings; and
- willing to be placed on a waiting list and participate in the second phase of interview if they are not interviewed during the initial phase of the study.

There was no set number of participants; rather, participant numbers were determined by reaching data saturation of the theoretical categories that emerged throughout the study (Charmaz, 2014). I did anticipate a minimum of 20 (Creswell, 2013), with the number of participants at each school likely to be in relative proportion to the size of the school (i.e. the smaller school will have less participants), and including representative participants from a variety of professional roles in the school. This study included nine non-teaching participants (i.e. four administrators, two school nurses, a paraprofessional, a social worker and an office coordinator) and fifteen teachers. Eleven participants, nine female, were from school A and

thirteen from school B, ten of whom identified as being female. Participants, ages 28-55 years, described being in their current position anywhere between 1 and 25 years, with a range of 6 – 30 years working with youth in some capacity. I used an open ended question to elicit race and ethnicity data. Of the twenty participants whom responded, 19 self-identified as being some variation of "American", "U.S.-born", or specifically described their heritage as Canadian or European decent, with only one identifying as "African-American". Eighteen participants reported their race as White/Caucasian, with one self-identifying as Asian, and one as Black.

Data Collection Methods

Data Sources and Instruments

As is typical in grounded theory studies, informant interviews were a primary source of data; however, to add depth, context and the potential for triangulation and theoretical development, I also collected data via direct participant observations, as well as reviewing documents, policies, website or videos participants pointed out as being influential (hereafter referred to with the encompassing term *artifacts*), and the use of analytic memoing as both a data source and an analytic method, often including general field notes and reflections.

Data collection instruments.

Interview guide. The interview guide (Appendix F) was developed in alignment with Charmaz's (2014) recommendations for intensive interviewing and to be reflective of symbolic interactionism (SI), which she describes as "a dynamic theoretical perspective that views human actions as constructing self, situations, and society". She further states that SI "sees people as active beings engaged in practical activities in their worlds and emphasizes how they accomplish these activities" (p. 262-263). The interview guide begins with introductory questions aimed at understanding the position and experience of the participant, followed by a "grand tour" question (Spradley, 1979) broad, yet focused enough to elicit information specifically related to the SSC process. To build rapport and trust, I also incorporated Charmaz's (2014) recommendation of

beginning with questions reflective of "collective practices", exploring basic and common daily experiences, before moving to individual participant reactions and experiences (p. 65).

Observational tool. Participant observation is a key source of data in grounded theory inquiry. I created an original observational guide for this study (Appendix G). The guide includes both general observation and space for related reflection. In addition to this guide, I took diligent, detailed and descriptive observational field notes.

Other data sources. Participant interviews and observations were the primary sources of data, but additional data sources are worthy of noting here as well.

Post-interview participant reflections. I offered participants an opportunity to share any post-interview thoughts, reflections, insights or additional information that they may not have thought to share during the initial interview. To facilitate this, I encouraged participants to either (a) email me directly, (b) write thoughts free-hand and/or type their notes and provide me with a copy or send via email, or (c) use the Posts-Interview Survey: Participant Reflection Form that I created for this purpose (Appendix H). I clearly stated that this was not an expectation of participation, rather it was an opportunity for them to share further information if they wish. I offered this in hopes of providing an alternative way to provide additional information.

Extant documents and artifacts. Extant documents (Charmaz, 2014), in the context of this study, refers to school-specific policies, documents, visuals within the school setting (i.e. posters or displays), websites, videos or other *artifacts* related to the phenomenon of study. Given the research questions and design, I anticipated conducting some level of document review and was open to other relevant sources of data that may emerge as being potentially informative to the phenomenon of interest, SSC. Specifically, I planned to review and reflect on any school policies, training materials that might be suggested by participants as related to the SSC process.

Process maps. During my methodological exploration I became aware of situational analysis (SA) as a grounded theory method (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2015), and translated

some of the SA mapping techniques into what I describe as *process mapping.* The application of this method is detailed in the analysis section.

General field notes. In addition to observational data collection, as described above, I took additional field notes throughout the study if and when I recognized something that may be related to the phenomena and process of SSC. This was typically integrated into my analytic memos, but at times if it was particularly relevant to a specific observation session, I added field notes to the end of those observation session notes.

Memo-writing. Memoing is also an essential component of grounded theory as it assists in processing ideas, being reflexive and supporting analysis throughout the study. Charmaz (2014) describes it as creating "an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches" (p. 162).

Member-checking. Although often noted as being critical to enhancing credibility in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), extant literature on the matter offers a diversity of views on the value of member checks (Thomas, 2017). After much exploration of the literature, an accounting and analysis of why and how I would do this and to what end, gaining IRB approval to invite participants to review and respond to manuscript drafts, and consulting with my primary adviser, I made a methodological decision to not engage in the member checking process. Subsequently, after reading Thomas's (2017) literature review of studies mentioning member checking, my decision was solidified. Thomas describes, and cites a number of authors cautioning with similar sentiments, member checking is "unlikely to be relevant to research focused on theory development and generalization" (p. 23). However, the findings will be shared both through a preliminary viewing of manuscripts and presentations to the study participants, after which I will consider any feedback I receive.

Reflexive journaling. I engaged in reflective journaling at the end of most days I was engaging in research. Attention to reflexivity, through journaling, is an exercise in self-awareness

that is valuable as a way to recognize the interplay of my own perspective and potential biases in the data and analysis, as well as to support the rigor of the study while moving through an iterative process of data collection, analysis and theoretical development (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study Procedures

Sampling and Recruitment

I initially met with the administrators of each of the participating middle schools serving as study sites. School A scheduled small-group meetings with nearly all the staff in the school. I provided a brief 5-10 minute presentation of the study and provided invitational flyers. School B arranged for me to present briefly at three separate staff meetings, one with teachers and two with paraprofessionals. At the same school I was able to enter the nurses office to offer the study to that team as well. I left recruitment fliers with each of the groups. School A recruitment occurred quickly and without the need for any follow-up. The lead contact at school B followed up with staff by sending a reminder email of the study. In hopes of gaining more non-teaching staff at either location and to increase the number of participants at school B, the larger school, I conducted a referral sampling recruitment strategy, approved by IRB and done via email (Appendix C).

Data Collection Procedures

Enrollment and consent. Data collection began in January 2016 as soon as participants were available, and continued as I enrolled new study participants. An initial email was sent to participants that may have indicated interest at initial contact (i.e. in-person at a school in-service meeting, via an email response to an initial study invitation, etc.) with the consent form and request to confirm eligibility by revising the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which were listed in the email. On the day of the first interview and/or observation I went over the consent form in detail, answered questions and had them sign the consent form prior to beginning the interview or

observation. I provided each participant with a hard-copy of the signed consent form at our next meeting time, as well as sending a scanned copy of the signed consent form for their records.

Interviews.

Interview pilot. Prior to initiating the study at the participant sites, I piloted the interview questions with two middle-school staff outside the study district. We reviewed the questions in a group conversation through which I received their verbal feedback. They understood the questions and described briefly how they would respond. I made minor changes to the interview protocol based on their feedback and my experience of how the interview flowed and/or flow was disrupted. The only specific suggestion they provided was to corroborate participants' statements of how they connect through observation. In their experience they stated being aware of staff members whose' actions and beliefs around how their actions are perceived are not consistent with the observations of others. The piloting of the interview guided my reflection and revising of the interview guide using Charmaz's (2014) guidelines.

Interview process. To be respectful of participants' time, and for their convenience, I attempted to keep interviews to one hour in length or less. Interviews were conducted at their school, in a private location of their choosing. Each participant was interviewed on one occasion. Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Interviews preceded observations in all but one case; otherwise the first observation usually occurred the same day after the initial interview.

Observation process. The observations were intended to occur in two separate 3-4 hour sessions at different times of the day and year, in either a direct or shadowing, 'go-along' style depending on the participants role. This approach allowed me to observe and document the SSC process, as well as ask clarifying questions during or after the observation if and when necessary. Based on what emerged during the analysis, I had often had an opportunity to ask a brief follow-up or clarifying questions during the second interview session, adding depth and clarity to

enhance theoretical adequacy (Charmaz, 2014). One participant did not want to participate in the observation portion of the study. Another was unable to complete the second observation session. Second observations were more focused, building upon the emerging integrative theory.

Document and artifact collection. Participants were asked to share any documents, policies or other informative items that may relate to the SSC process. A few participants provided actual documents they used and others simply mentioned or suggested resources to look into.

Compensation. Given the limited budget of this study, a maximum possible total compensation of $60 for study participation was provided. A $10 gift card was given for each interview and a $20 gift card for each observation session.

Data management. A professional transcription service transcribed the digitally recorded interviews. All electronic data were password protected and stored on one of two University cloud-based services. Original recordings were uploaded to a cloud-based system that requires duo-two-factor authentication (Box Secure) and then immediately deleted from the recording device. Box Secure was also used to store original signed and scanned copies of the consent forms, original transcripts, and one participant identification document that contained the participant name and assigned numeric study participant number. All other observational data, memoing, journaling, and other analysis process documents were maintained in the basic cloud-based system. De-identified, edited transcripts with all names and identifying information located in the context of the transcript redacted, were also stored, along with observation data, in NVivo. Data was de-identified before being entered into NVivo for storage, management and higher-level coding. Any additional non-electronic data was kept in a safe at the home of the PI (WF).

Ethical Considerations and Approval

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and school district research board approval were completed prior to the initiation of this study. I went over the consent form (Appendix E) in

detail with each participant before they signed it. Staff were interacting with students during these observation periods, and I recognized that adolescents are considered a vulnerable population in terms of research, so care was taken to protect them from harm (University of Minnesota, 2015). Specifically, I focused on the actions of the staff members, and the reactions of students if indicated, but intentionally avoided writing about or inquiring about student-specific stories or details unless critical to understanding a staff's actions. I was also cautious to redact all names on the transcribed interviews and did not write about specific student stories that had the potential to breach confidentiality. The observations were focused on the process of connection, not on individual students. With any brief notes or journaling about my participant observation experiences, I was sure not to include identifying information or anything specific to the student's story, health condition, or otherwise uniquely identifying information. Discussing issues related to interpersonal connections and factors related to the SSC process may be sensitive. Confidentiality is imperative in order to protect participants as they describe sensitive topics. In this study participants' identities remained confidential. Moreover, all data was safeguarded per IRB requirements. In addition to the ethical considerations described in this section, I used Creswell's (2012) table of Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research, throughout the study to re-evaluate and anticipate potential ethical concerns (p. 58-59).

Data Analysis

"What's happening here?" (Glaser, 1978 in Charmaz, 2014, p. 34). This is the overarching question that I started with and referred to ongoingly throughout the research and even the writing process. Although I started with a phenomenon of study, how staff in various professional roles connect with students in middle school settings, I was open to where the data and constructivist grounded theory methods would guide me. This openness, along with the systematic nature of constructivist grounded theory allowed the core theoretical category of *Creating Space* to surface.

The analysis is presented in this section as a flow from early methods to those used later in the process, primarily to provide attention to the details of each step and for ease of conveying this details to a reader; however, constructivist grounded theory is not linear. Each of these processes builds upon one another and were often revisited as tools to refocus or refine along the way. Charmaz (2014) provides an excellent depiction of this process in Figure 1.1. (p. 18). Table 1 provides specific details of the study process.

Table 1
Summary of Research Design, Methods and Procedures

Methods	Description of Methods and Procedures January – October 2016
Literature review	Conducted a cursory literature review sufficient to become familiar with gaps in school connectedness research.
Research question	What is the theoretical process, and the related influential ecological factors, through which school staff members connect with students in middle school settings?
Methodology	Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT)
Proposal development	Developed the doctoral proposal based on CGT methods, primarily guided by Charmaz (2014). • Interview guide • Observation protocol (guided by extant literature)
Ethics approvals	University IRB approval Participating district approval received
Pilot interviews	Conducted a brief pilot interview with two local middle-school staff members who are acquaintances of the PI (WF). They offered insight into the questions and suggestions for observational corroboration of interview data through observations.
Sampling	**Description of Recruitment and Sampling November 2016 – April 2017**
Setting	Two same-district, Midwest middle schools were invited to participate
Sampling design	Purposive sampling with variation of professional roles (see section XX for inclusion criteria and recruitment procedures) Referral sampling
Participants' backgrounds	Teachers (n = 15) Administrators (n = 4) School nurses (n = 2) Para professional (n = 1) Social worker (n = 1) Office coordinator (n = 1)

Data collection methods and types	Guided interviews (n = 24; 281 pages), conducted in English Digital audio recording and subsequent professional transcription Observation sessions (n = 45; mean time per session = 148 minutes; 343 pages) Collection of participant-referenced documents/policies/website links (n=15)
Analysis	Description of Data Analysis February 2017 – November 2018
Analytic methods	Methodological and analytic memoing (166 pages) Reflexive journaling Observational field notes
Analytic methods continued	Listened to audio playback and compared to each transcription, editing inconsistencies and conducting analytic memoing throughout Line-by-line handwritten coding of transcripts Situational-analysis guided process mapping Focused coding of transcripts and observations Document consolidation and review Memo sorting, theoretical integration
Software	Nvivo 11 and 12 were used for data management and advanced coding
Post-study literature review	Conducted a literature review to aid in synthesis of the findings and compare categories and properties to existing literature.
Dissemination	Dissemination of Findings May 2018 – Ongoing
Publications	Doctoral dissertation Two results-oriented publications
Presentations	Early results present at a local conference (May 2018) Sharing results with participating schools (Spring 2019)

Coding Structure and Process

Data analysis in grounded theory begins with coding, described as the "bones" of the analysis, which ultimately "shapes an analytic frame", or "working skeleton" that guides the analytic process (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). As guided by Charmaz (2014), I used constant comparison, defined as a technique through which "newly collected data are compared in an ongoing fashion with data obtained earlier, to refine theoretically relevant categories" (Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 723), to analyze data after each interview and observation. I aimed for theoretical

sensitivity throughout analysis, attempting to employ Charmaz's (2014) suggested method of using "gerunds" whenever possible during coding in order to keep the analysis moving and focused on actions.

Initial coding. Developing initial codes is the first step in the coding process with codes being "provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116). I began initial coding by engaging in open, line-by-line coding that descriptively reflected what the participant said, using in vivo codes whenever possible. The initial line-by-line coding technique aided in the development of more focused codes and potential categories, helping to see patterns and processes (Charmaz, 2014). While remaining open to any "theoretical directions" the data suggested, further coding of the line-by-line codes helped discover gaps where more data was required (Charmaz, p. 114). I chose to conduct line-by-line coding by hand on printed transcripts with memo-type notes in the margins, and eventually began an ongoing analytic memo document to track the developing codes, properties and codal relationships. I also created an excel spreadsheet to track the codes and meanings, which proved to be helpful entering into focused coding.

Focused coding. The second phase of grounded theory analysis is focused coding. In this phase I assessed which codes were significant or occurring most frequently, which manifested sometimes in elevating an initial code to a category based on the frequency and significance, or grouping codes by coding my initial codes further to develop categories that describe the data well (Charmaz, 2014). The goal of this phase is to move closer to a theoretical understanding, with focused codes including larger sections of data and being more conceptual than those in the initial coding phase (Charmaz, 2014). The focused coding process, done preliminarily in an excel document and then transferred to NVivo, assisted in determining "the adequacy and conceptual strength" of the initial codes (Charmaz, 2014, p. 140). Again, as in the initial coding, I engaged in constant comparison and pattern seeking throughout this phase.

"Codes do not reflect inherent truths. Instead, they reflect what we see and define at a particular point in time, and that may change. Hence, we can change the names we give our codes for a more telling term" (Charmaz, 2017, p. 3).

Axial coding. Depending on the level, or depth, of analysis at this point, after focused coding, Charmaz (2014) purports that the initial and focused phases of coding may be sufficient, yet acknowledges that either axial or theoretical coding may be used to move towards theory. Given the focus of this study was on a social process, and the potentially influential ecological factors related to SSC relationships, I describe what I engaged in as *theoretically sensitive axial coding*.

Axial coding is a type of coding that "relates categories to subcategories, specifies properties and dimension of a category, and reassembles the data . . . to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 147). Acknowledging there is no consensus on the helpfulness or hindrances axial coding may have, Charmaz (2014) chooses not to use traditional axial coding, warning that "relying on axial coding may limit what and how researchers learn about their studied worlds and, thus, restricts the codes they construct" (p. 149). I found clarity in how to apply this method to my specific study in Corbin and Strauss's (2008) simple definition of axial coding as "the act of relating concepts/categories to each other" (p. 198), which is often done simply through the discussion of two or more concepts in one memo (p. 195). My approach was to acknowledge the dissensus around axial coding, be self-aware through reflective journaling, meticulously record analytic decisions, and to view axial coding as the way I moved beyond focused coding towards a integrative theoretical explanation of the social process I sought to understand, namely student-staff connection. Moreover, my analysis focused on "theorizing" rather than formal theory development, consistent with Charmaz's (2014) statement that "the fundamental contribution of grounded theory methods resides in guiding interpretive theoretical practice, not in providing a blueprint for theoretical products"(p. 233).

Theoretical coding. Theoretical coding, described as what "researchers draw on from prior theories or analytic schemes and use to integrate the categories of their analysis" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 345), was not specifically applied in this analysis due to the early stage of theoretical development, yet is a critical point of discussion. The blending of existing theories or "theoretical coding families" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 151) developed by Glaser (1978) has the potential to support the development of an emergent theory by helping further clarify and expand category relationships, bringing coherence and comprehensiveness. Using reflexive journaling I certainly note the theoretical influences that impact my worldview, and therefore indirectly my analysis; however, I took great care to not attached specific constructs or relationship, other than categorizing barriers and facilitators of the SSC process by ecological level, to be consistent with the grounded theory method. Beyond my pre-study theoretical exposure, the post-literature review of categories and concepts that surfaced in the study offered a preliminary comparison of the Creating Space theory, but there was not a theoretical coding scheme applied. Theoretical coding is certainly a possibility in future studies in this area, at which time it would be more appropriate based on additional data gathering and an advanced level of theoretical development.

Process Mapping

Situational analysis (SA) uses, depending on the purpose and needs of the research, one or more mapping strategies, namely situational maps, social worlds/arenas maps, and positional maps. The following summarizes the SA orientation:

> The assumptions we hold, the actions we take, the data we generate, and the analyses we construct all reside within the situation of inquiry. No longer can researchers hide behind data and present their findings as objective facts separate from the conditions of their production. Every study develops within a situation and likely is transformed by multiple situations throughout inquiry. (Clarke et al., 2015)

Ultimately, situational mapping was a method I considered and attempted because it "lays out all the major human, nonhuman, discursive, historical, symbolic, cultural, political, and other elements in the research situation of concern" (Clarke, et al., 2015); yet, this method diverges from grounded theory in that with SA "the situation of inquiry itself broadly conceived becomes the key unit of analysis", whereas grounded theory is focused on theorizing social processes (Clarke et al., 2015). I took to heart Clark et al.'s (2015) comment "I hope situational analysis makes useful contributions to the GTM [grounded theory methods] banquets. Please feel free to sample" (p.109). Thus, I used situational mapping as a jumping off point and after concurrently having read a paper by Wicker (1985) on ways to develop conceptual frameworks combined SA with conceptual mapping. Early in the analysis process I created hand-drawn maps for each participant, based on their interview and observational data. I discontinued creating individual maps once the SSC process elements began emerging, and then transitioned to a cumulative, iterative mapping process. This was the primary way through which the specific SSC process phases were developed.

Document and Artifact Analysis

The interview guide included a question asking participants to describe or provide any documents or other information they use or know of that points towards the SSC process. Charmaz (2014) specifically discusses the use of "elicited documents", essentially the provision of documents by participants at elicited by the researchers request for further information (p. 47). In this study, artifacts refers to anything that is not a document (i.e. webpages, videos, messaging posted around the school setting, etc.).

There are myriad ways to utilize and analyze extant documents and artifacts (Charmaz, 2014; Bowen, 2009). The documents and artifacts aided in theoretical sampling of the data as Bowen (2009) states that documents, or in the case of this study documents or artifacts, may "suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed" (p. 30).

For example, moving through the iterative and simultaneous data collection and grounded theory analysis process, while observing numerous posters with positive messaging, personal artifacts or photos in participants office spaces, brief district supported videos giving an overview of each school, and many other document or artifact items that convey care and respect towards students, as well as messaging that was personal to the participants. During interviews later in the process, or sometimes during a second observation if an interview had already occurred, I then asked the participants about the space and artifacts in their room. They all reported that it was intentional to share something about themselves, their belief in students, or other similar sentiments. In this way, though the data did not point to the usefulness of extensive coding of documents or the meaning of specific artifacts or messaging language, reviewing and attending to artifacts did lead to theoretical sampling of data.

I compiled the documents and other artifact-type items that were reviewed into a master document to aid in analysis. The conclusion I reached in this study, which is alluded to briefly in the manuscripts presented as chapter 4 and 5 of this dissertation, is that all of the policies, documents or other multimedia artifacts participants provided or ones that I encountered throughout the study via observation or exploration of the schools website, were most related to the phenomenon of SSC by way of intention and intentionality. Moreover, it was not necessary for the purpose of this study, given the core social process (core category) of Creating Space other than to note that the staff and administrators that participated in this study aligned with an overall desire to convey the importance of SSC.

The assignment of documents and artifacts to an overarching way of demonstrating the properties of intention and intentionality was sufficient to answer some of the questions posed by Charmaz (2014) "what is the purported purpose of the document? Might it serve other unstated or assumed purposes? Which ones?" and "What kinds of comparisons can you make between documents? Between different documents on the same topic?" (p. 53-54). Future research may

require a more in-depth analysis of each of the date sources using questions such as "how was the document(s) produced? By whom? For which intended audiences?", "How does the document reflect it's author's (or authors;) assumptions? Which meanings are embedded in this form? In it's content?", "Which realities does the document claim to represent?", "How is language used?", or "Who benefits from the document", among others (Charmaz, 2014, p. 53-54). During analysis I also kept the following in mind as a way to critically consider what documents existed, were presented or suggested to me for follow up, and what was missing.

> People create documents for specific purposes and they do so within social, economic, historical, cultural, and situational contexts. The genre and specific form of a document as well as any written text in it draw on particular views and discourses. Written texts not only serve as records, but also explore explain, justify, and/or foretell actions, whether these texts are elicited or extant. What does not become part of a record can also be telling. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 46)

Development of the Core and Sub-Categories (Process and Sub-Processes)

Grounded theory studies are aimed at understanding and potentially explaining social or psychosocial processes. Thus, an analysis oriented towards process, rather than descriptions or themes, is critical. I repeatedly asked myself the question "what is going on here" and created my own coding "cheat-sheet" with the questions I wanted to repeatedly ask of the data and be sensitive to as I iteratively collected and analyzed the data. In this process, while staying true to the aims of the study, I struggled with how to reconcile the focus on student-staff connections and to remain attentive to the process staff engaged in to cultivate such connections. Corbin and Strauss's descriptions related to this conundrum were helpful in understanding the difference between a phenomenon, such as SSC, and a process (i.e. the way staff connect with students): "To us, phenomenon stands for the topic, the event, the happening, the goal, or the major idea (category or theme) contained in a set of data. Process stands for the means of getting there" (p.

101). This was critical to my insight about "what was happening", because I could then recognize student-staff connectedness as being the phenomenon, the desired outcome that aids in healthy adolescent development, but the SSC processes describes how the staff members go about connecting. The early findings, if I had remained primarily descriptive, would have resulted in the multiphase SSC process, but would not have revealed the broader process of Creating Space. Creating Space, then was the core category (aka process), and SSC was a sub-process that "explain[ed] in more detail how the larger process is expressed" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 101).

Once the data pointed towards Creating Space as a core category, and the developing subcategories, I revisited the criteria set by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 105), Strauss (1987, p. 36) to be sure it fit with their description and core category criteria before moving forward. The movement towards an integrative theory was guided by theoretical sensitivity, sampling and saturation.

Theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is being "sensitive to thinking about data in theoretical terms" (Strauss, 1987, p. 21). Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain it this way:

> It takes being immersed in the materials for some time before the significance of what is being said comes through. Sensitivity grows with exposure to data. I might say that analyzing data is like peeling an onion. Every layer that is removed takes you that much closer to the core. This is what is meant by 'theoretical sensitivity', being more in-tune to the meanings embedded in data. (p. 230-231)

Theoretical sampling. In this study purposeful and referral sampling were used to recruit participants; however, theoretical sampling, despite the confusion that sometimes comes with the word 'sampling', was used to elicit additional relevant *data*. Theoretical sampling is an approach to gathering data to explore emerging concepts, properties and dimensions wherein "the researcher takes one step at a time with data gathering, followed by analysis, followed by more

data gathering until a category reaches the point of 'saturations'" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 146). It is through the iterative analysis process, theoretical sensitivity and sampling that I came to select the core category of *Creating Space*.

Theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when "additional analysis no longer contributes to discovering anything new about a category" (Strauss, 1987, p. 21). It is the analytic point at which "all categories are well developed in terms of properties, dimensions, and variations" and additional "data gathering and analysis add little new to the conceptualization, through variations can always be discovered." (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263). I am including the following analytic memo excerpt describing the point at which I believe I reach theoretical saturation for this integrated theory:

> I feel like CREATING SPACE fully explains what the staff are doing because I could code every single bit of data as creating space. More recently I've been coding only exemplar quotes/data as creating space but it ALL is creating space. The same is true for each of the subcategories. I am not seeing any data that doesn't fit into those subcategories. The details and nuances are different (representing the dimensions and properties), but all the data fits and links together. At this point I'm just doing my best to finish out the coding, while continuing to question and explore what comes up through memoing.
> Finished coding 309 interview. . . If I had to guess I would say that today, or participant interview 309 is the tipping point for theoretical saturation. However, I will continue to go through 310-313 interviews, observations and documents to compare and look for anything that may not fit. I also want to honor the data and time they provided. The last few have rich information because I was at the point of envisioning the theory when I began engaging with them so all those interviews have the base-questions as well as the theoretical sampling and

sensitivity that I had at the time. I will likely find data and links that I have a fresh perspective on even now. I feel a sense of relief that I have what I need to fully develop this integrative theory AND an idea of where else this could go in the future. (Methodological memo, January 22nd, 2018)

Theoretical integration. Integration is "the process of linking categories around a core category and refining and trimming the resulting theoretical construction" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 263). The more than 2-year research and analysis process, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe as a necessity for qualitative researchers, "to allow time for sensitivity to grow and for the evolution of thought to take place" (p. 244-245), and working with the data and prospective theory until it 'feels right' (p. 274). This was achieved by reviewing and constantly comparing data, codes, incidents, documents and artifacts, analytic and methodological memos, journaling, diagrams, and using NVivo's query mode to find any missing pieces, while continuing to ask questions of the data. Additionally, it was done in a way that addressed the study's original aims and made room for emergent and unexpected theoretical ideas. The final step, was the post-study review of the literature and attempting to write and develop a visual model for an audience through which the message had to be clear and concise. This iterative, data-grounded, yet creative work was a reminder that "qualitative analysis is an art as well as a science and that there is nowhere in the analysis where this becomes as apparent as in the final integration" (Corbin & Strauss, p. 274), and one that necessitates continual reflexivity and is amenable to rigorous standards.

Rigor

Considering this study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach, and is methodologically naturalistic, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) qualitative standards of credibility (truth value), transferability (applicability), dependability (consistency) and confirmability (neutrality), will be used as rigor guides. The credibility of this study is supported by the use of

multiple data sources and multiple observations sessions with nearly all of the participants. Though there was not a possibility of doing a "negative case analysis" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309) by specifically engaging participants that did not connect with students, many of the participants did reveal through their interviews specific challenging connection stories and anecdotal stories of other staff that were not perceived as connecting with students. This data was taking under careful consideration, thus offering an indirect version of opposing cases. Gathering substantive data and using the data, along with memoing and reflexive journaling, to present a robust analytic report that may be used by others, as they see fit, to transfer the report and/or grounded theory into other circumstances, will address transferability. Dependability was supported through methods to confirm credibility, in addition to maintaining an ongoing dialogue with my adviser as an "auditor" to assist me in reviewing the process and product of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lastly, confirmability was addressed by creating an "audit trail" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) consistent reflexive journaling (Patnaik, 2013), maintaining data (including decision-making memos and reflective writing) in an organized and transparent way, and ultimately creating a product that is supported by and grounded in the data. Additionally, I reviewed and addressed the components of quality qualitative research described by Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 307) and Charamz (2014, p. 336-337).

As a novice researcher I drew upon the support, experience and expertise of my adviser throughout the study. Additionally, I committed to, and succeed in, learning this constructivist grounded theory methodology and accompanying methods. This learning was supported by my energy and enthusiasm around the research because (a) it aligns with my own epistemological and ontological views; (b) the process oriented research question guiding this study is consistent with grounded theory methodology; (c) connectedness to caring adults in school settings is a critical developmental asset for adolescent health and wellbeing; (d) I believe giving school staff members a voice and opportunity to describe *how* they connect with students can really only be

accomplished using qualitative methods; and (e) findings will further strengthen existing quantitative data related to SSC. Lastly, given the study was conducted as dissertation work and I was the only researcher completing all aspects of the study, other than transcription, I was grateful to have a committed, multidisciplinary dissertation committee to assist with feedback and input as needed.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity is also a critical component of a quality qualitative study. “At a very basic level, reflexivity is an attempt to find answers to the questions, ‘What do I know?’ and ‘How do I know it?’” (Patnaik, 2013, p. 100 citing Caloran, 2003). I originally planned to follow Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion to address: a) “the daily schedule and logistics of the study”; b) “a personal diary” aimed at self-reflection and recognizing new emerging insights about the data; and c) “a methodological log”, to document methodological choices and rational (p. 327). That translated into me maintaining a hand-written calendar solely for the study; reflecting reflexively in a journal document, and in my analytic memos when relevant; and maintaining a separate set of methodological memos as an audit trail.

My reflexivity in the writing of this dissertation was inspired by Patnaik’s (2013) article, and in particular the following:

> An understanding of one’s own attitudes, values and biases is a useful tool in not only gaining deeper insight into the research, but also in ensuring that the focus remains on the research and its participants. Simultaneously, by situating oneself in the research process the researcher facilitates the reader’s understanding of the perspectives that led to the analyses and findings. (p. 100).

Throughout the study I tried to maintain a reflexive stance while actively interviewing and observing participants, as well as during analysis and through ongoing journaling (see papers 4 and 5 for brief reflexive statements).

Chapter 4

Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School:

An Integrative Theory of Creating Space

Synopsis

Connectedness with a caring adult at school is a known developmental asset, a critical protective factor, yet little is known about the nuanced process of student-staff connection-building, as perceived and lived out by school personnel. The purpose of this study was to identify the process through which school staff members establish connections with students in middle school settings. Constructivist grounded theory methodology guided this multi-site, 24 participant study in two Midwestern middle schools. Data, including transcribed interviews, participant observation and document/artifact review, were collected and analyzed between January 2016 and November 2018. An integrative theory of *Creating Space* is the core social process expressed by participants within which the *student-staff connection* process occurs. The *Creating Space* conceptual model provides an integrated illustration of the multi-level, interdependent connection processes school staff engage in as they convey belief in, care for, and reverence towards students by: (a) *seeing within, beyond and between*, (b) *embracing our shared humanness*, c) *equilibrating with empathy* and (c) *demonstrating relational artistry.*

Keywords: qualitative research, adolescent health and wellbeing, connectedness, school, grounded theory, middle school, staff

Introduction

Being connected to a caring adult at school has been framed as a "health asset" for adolescents (Garcia-Moya, Brooks, Morgan, & Moreno, 2015, p. 641). Understanding and promoting this health assets and its potentially positive influence on adolescent development is urgent and timely since the more than 3 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 now constitute 42% of the global population (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018a), making this the largest cohort of young people in history (Sawyer, Afifi, Bearinger, Blakemore, Dick, Ezeh, & Patton, 2012; WHO, 2018a). Many adolescents experience significant disruptions in their health and wellbeing, including unintentional injuries, poor mental health, substance use, violence and numerous other preventable health-related conditions and injuries (Sawyer et al., 2012; Patton et al., 2016; WHO, 2018a). Such disruptions in health and wellbeing can result in negative outcomes experienced at the individual, family, community, societal and even planetary levels. Fortunately, promoting adolescent health is an international priority (Diers, 2013; Every Woman Every Child, 2015; Healthy People 2020, n.d.; Patton et al., 2016; United Nations, n.d.); a priority that offers the potential for a "triple dividend" of immediate and future positive outcomes across the individuals' life course, as well as for future generations (Kleinert & Horton, 2016, p. 2355; Patton et al., 2016). Indeed, adolescents "are our best chance to achieve radical change for a prosperous, healthy, and sustainable world" (Kleinert & Horton, 2016, p. 2356). Cultivating students' social connections with caring adults in school settings is an upstream approach to preventing risky behaviors and promoting healthy developmental trajectories. Adults, including school personal or health and youth service providers are key stakeholders in advancing global health by way of focusing on adolescents at the population level.

Promoting Adolescent Health and Wellbeing through Connectedness in School Settings

Health is only one, albeit integral, component of overall wellbeing, which is "a state of being in balance or alignment in the body, mind, and spirit" and is comprised of health,

relationships, security, purpose, community and environment (Kreitzer, Delegran, & Uptmor, 2014, p. 125). Promoting health through connectedness to others is a holistic approach to enhancing adolescent wellbeing, and ultimately the wellbeing of our families and communities. More specifically, myriad positive physical, psychosocial, mental health, and health-behavior outcomes are associated with social connectedness across the lifespan (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Saeri, Cruwys, Barlow, Stronge, & Sibley, 2018; Seppala, 2014), as well as between caring adults and youth (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Curran & Wexler, 2017; Sieving et al., 2017; Synergos, 2014), especially in school (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2018a; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Resnick et al., 1997).

An early definition of school connection was "the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004, p. 233). Though a unified definition has yet to be declared nearly 15 years later, much attention has been directed toward what comprises school connection and distinguishes it from other protective factors such as belonging and engagement (Libby, 2004; GarcÍa-Moya, Bunn, Jiménez-Iglesias, Paniagua, & Brooks, 2018; Gowing, 2017; Gowing & Jackson, 2016). One component that is consistently included in most descriptions of school connectedness is the social connections between teachers and students (Garcia-Moya et al., 2018). In this study, we include other adults working in the school setting and label this component of school connectedness as student-staff connections (SSC). Furthermore, the following definition of school connectedness was adopted as a guide for the study:

> In social relationships, connectedness is the degree to which a person perceives that he/she has a close, intimate, meaningful, and significant relationship with another person or group of people. This perception is characterized by positive expressions (i.e. empathy, belonging, caring, respect, and trust) that are both

> received and reciprocated, either by the person or between people, through effective and consistent social interactions. (Phillips-Salimi, et al., 2012, p. 7)

Exploring SSCs from an ecological perspective requires inclusion of any and all staff that interact with students. Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, and Varga (2016) specifically acknowledge the value, and call for further investigation, of such positive youth development relational processes using qualitative methods (Futch Ehrlich, 2016). Similarly, Garcia-Moya et al. (2018) suggest an "unpacking" of the school connectedness concept by specifically examining teacher connectedness (p. 1). Schools are on the forefront of promoting CAY connectedness, yet the paucity of research expressly exploring the development of SSC, especially with staff other than teachers, necessitates inquiry that facilitates an understanding of the *why* and the *how* of the social processes underlying student-staff connectedness.

Marin and Brown (2008) acknowledge that the primary goal of the education system is academic preparation, yet "schools are increasingly called upon to develop socially competent, physically health and civically engaged youth who will also carry those assets into adulthood" (p. 8). Attending to the critical and reciprocal relationship between health and education presumably augments the promotion of adolescent and societal health and wellbeing by directly and indirectly impacting social determinants of health (SDOH) and addressing health and educational inequities (APHA, 2018; Marin & Brown, 2008; Zimmerman, Woolf, & Haley, 2015). This is illustrated by numerous "whole school" models including the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model (CDC, 2018b; Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015), Health Promoting Schools (WHO, 2017), and other whole-school-type and school wellbeing models (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Rowe, Stewart, & Patterson, 2007). Not only are caring SSC interactions likely to have broad health and equity implications, they are explicitly associated with positive academic outcomes and offer protection from risk behaviors and poor health outcomes including

violence, substance use, and mental health problems (Benard & Slade, 2009; Bond et al., 2007; McNeely et al., 2002; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993; Resnick et al., 1997), among others. Despite these known benefits, many students continue to be disengaged from school and at higher risk for reduced levels of academic success and dropout which is associated with "status risk factors ('conditions') (i.e. family SES, race and ethnicity, or "eduaitonl risk factors ('events') (i.e. low grade and test scores during early grades, "in-grade retention", and misbehavior or delinquency), and "behavioral risk factors" (i.e. low classroom or school activity participant, less cognitively engaged in learning, "inappropriate or counterproductive behavior", and "do not fully develop or maintain a sense of school belonging") (Finn & Zimmer, 2012, p. 98-99). Importantly, "engagement behaviors are responsive to teachers' and schools' practices (Finn & Zimmer, 2012, p. 99).

Purpose

Using an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this study aimed to discover a deep, nuanced understanding of how school personnel connect with middle school students (i.e., 6-8th graders, roughly 12-14 years old), including what factors may support or hinder this process. The goal of the study was to identify and understand the theoretical process, and the related ecological factors, through which school staff members connect with students in middle school. The specific aims of this study were to develop an interpretive theoretical model, grounded in the perspectives and experiences of school staff members, characterizing the process of student-staff connection (SSC) process in middle schools; and, identify factors at multiple ecological levels that school staff members perceive as influencing SSC processes. We are unaware of any research describing the broader, deeper social process that school personnel, inclusive of non-teaching staff, engage in to facilitate the creation of such connections in middle-school settings.

Methods

Design

Constructivist grounded theory (CGT) methodology, as conceived by Charmaz (2014), and informed by Corbin & Strauss (2008), guided this study. CGT is flexible and holistic, acknowledging that the data, analyses and the emerging theory are situated in a broader context wherein the data are socially constructed, thus essentially "an interpretation" of participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012, p. 500). Moreover, findings are grounded in, and arise from, participants' tacit knowledge, yet, are inevitably influenced by participant-researcher interactions, as well as the circumstances in which the explored phenomena takes place (Charmaz, 2014). For these reasons the term "integrative" rather than "substantive" is used when presenting the emergent theory, representing the coalescing of the aforementioned knowledge and perspectives.

Setting, Recruitment, and Sample

Two middle schools served as study sites; both are situated in the same large, Midwest metropolitan school district, one with just under 700 students and the other with approximately 1200 students. A purposeful sampling approach was used, namely "the selection of participants with shared knowledge or experience of the particular phenomena identified by the researcher as a potential area for exploration" (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009, p. 118). Recruitment began in December 2016 through a brief research presentation and the provision of study flyers at multiple staff meetings. The lead contact at each school assisted with reminder emails during initial recruitment. In April 2018 existing participants were invited to share a recruitment letter by email with coworkers they believed might be interested, thereby instituting the referral sampling strategy. Theoretical sensitivity, recognizing patterns and abstracting meaningful categories and relationships of the phenomena under study (Charmaz, 2014), governed the transition from purposeful sampling to theoretical sampling with participant recruitment, interview and

observation protocol changes, and document review and analytic strategy, until theoretical saturation was reached (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009; Charmaz 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss, 1987).

The purposeful and referral sampling approach yielded 27 potential participants. Two participants did not follow-up and one did not meet the inclusion criteria, resulting in a total sample of 24 middle-school staff members who had worked professionally with students on a regular basis for a minimum of one year. Participants included nine non-teaching staff (NTS) members (i.e. a paraprofessional, a social worker, an office coordinator, two school nurses, four administrators), and fifteen teachers and/or teaching specialists from varying content areas such as art, reading intervention, special education, math, language arts, critical thinking, and science. The 11 participants from the smaller school and 13 from the larger school ranged in age from 28-55, with five identifying as male and 19 as female. Of the 19 participants who responded to an open-ended demographic question of self-described ethnicity 17 reported their ethnicity in a variety of ways including American, U.S. born, Non-Hispanic/Latino, or some variation of European or Canadian ethnicity, and one self-identifies as African-American. In response to self-described race, one participant identifies as being Asian, one as Black, and all others as White, Caucasian, or Non-Hispanic/Latino.

Ethical Considerations

University Institutional Research Board (IRB) and local school district approvals were received prior to initiating recruitment, and participant written consent was obtained. Additional precaution was warranted to protect students attending site schools because middle school staff were interacting with students during observation sessions. Specifically, care was taken to focus on the connection process in observations and note-taking, rather than specifics related to students' stories, health conditions, or otherwise uniquely identifying information. One middle

school requested a general parent notification about the study to be sent out via a regular school publication.

Data Collection

Participant data were collected between January and July 2017 using face-to-face guided interviews which were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Additionally, there were 45 participant observation sessions with 23 of the participants (1-2 observation sessions per participating staff). One participant was unavailable for the second observation and another declined the participant observation component of the study for undisclosed reasons. Appendices F and G display the initial interview and observational guides, which evolved with slight modifications throughout the study based on the emerging data, as is typical in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The length of time spent interviewing each participant ranged from approximately10 minutes to just over an hour (68 minutes) with an average of 37 minutes per interview. Observation sessions ranged from 25 minutes to 4 hours and 20 minutes, with an average of approximately two and a half hours each (most were between 2-4 hours). Data collection concluded once theoretical saturation was reached as determined by the PI (WF) as the extensive analytic process was undertaken. The guided interview also included a request for participants to share any documents or policies that they deemed important and related to how they connect with students.

Data Analysis

Informed by Charmaz (2014) and Corbin and Strauss (2008), the analytic approach involved line-by-line, descriptive coding of every interview, that led to focused and theoretical coding of all interviews and observations, which involved extensive memoing, constant comparison and reflexive journaling (Laitinen, Kaunonen, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2014). Document-based data, and other artifact data such as the school website and videos, messaging visible throughout the school setting (e.g. posters, teacher bios posted next to their classroom door) were

reviewed, by using constant comparison of phenomenon-related content (Bowen, 2009). Documents and artifacts explored outside of observation sessions were not coded, instead they were reviewed for evidence of support of behaviors or concurrence with what was stated or observed in interviews and observation sessions; artifact data described within observational notes were coded. A method of hand-drawn and written process-mapping, adapted from a blending of situational analysis mapping methods (Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2015) and Wicker's (1985) diagramming as a way to develop conceptual frameworks, was also employed during initial coding to aid in visualizing the individual and multi-level SSC-related processes. Analytic and methodological memoing, and reflexive journaling, occurred throughout data collection and analysis. The PI (WF) competed all coding and analysis independently, with guidance by her doctoral adviser (CP). QSR International's NVivo 11 and 12 software was used for the storage, data management, querying and advanced coding of interview and observational data. All observations were reviewed throughout the iterative data collection-analysis-reflective process and coded in NVIVO along with the second round of interview transcript coding in an interactive, integrated manner. The analytic process occurred for just under two years.

Rigor and Reflexivity

Credibility (i.e., truth value) was established through multiple observation sessions and triangulation using multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309). Transferability (i.e. applicability) was addressed by the gathering of substantive data and integrated memoing and reflexive journaling. Dependability (i.e., consistency) is supported by the use of interview and observation guides as well as a detailed audit trail (Guba, 1981) completed through extensive methodological memoing and reflective dialogue with the adviser (CP) as an "auditor". Lastly, confirmability (i.e., neutrality) is possible through an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), reflexive journaling, and maintaining data (including decision-making memos) in an organized and transparent way.

Reflexive statement by the PI (WF). I (WF) recognize the significance and potential influence of my positionality on this study, identifying racially and ethnically as white of European descent, socio-economically privileged, cisgender woman approaching this study with nearly two decades of training and experience in the discipline of nursing and a particular concern for adolescent and public health. Though this study was not guided by theory, due to the use of constructivist grounded theory methodology, my perspective is likely influenced by resilience, positive and healthy youth development, developmental ecological systems, and nursing theories, as well as training in integrative therapies with an orientation towards whole-systems healing. Through ongoing reflective journaling I regularly engaged in reflexive thinking and writing, questioning and reassessing my coding and interpretation of the data in hopes to simultaneously honor my unique understanding of the unfolding processes and monitoring any interfering biases.

In order to maintain participants' anonymity, yet acknowledge the uniqueness and coherences in the *Creating Space* process by varying professional roles, participant data is referenced as being derived from either a teacher (T) or non-teaching staff (NTS) member, which is inclusive of any participants not identifying as currently being in a teaching role.

Results

Theoretical Overview

The integrative theory of *Creating Space*, referred to hereafter simply as Creating Space, was the core category that emerged, within which the concrete, dynamic, and continuous sub-process, namely *Student-Staff Connection (SSC)*, occurs. Participants described organizational, community and socio-political influences, with the broader SSC sub-process being rooted primarily in the intra- and interpersonal spheres. The overarching theory of cultivating SSC by *Creating Space* is described in detail below in Figure 1. The model provides a visual of the multi-level intrapersonal processes staff engage in followed by an arrow indicating the creation of the multidimensional space within which the more concrete, interpersonal SSC process takes

place. The perforated boundaries of the model indicate a dynamic, open system that is interdependent with the multilevel processes and any process-influencing ecological factors. The return arrow indicates the reciprocal nature of the space that is created, as well as the SSC process, as they feedback into the intrapersonal processes of each individual staff person.

Creating space is multidimensional. The Creating Space process is comprised of five spatial dimensions labeled as intrapersonal, interpersonal, temporal, ecological, and exploratory (Table 1 and Figure 1). The multidimensionality of the space staff create impact the type and level of connections that occur. *Collective connections* occur when a participant describes or appears through observation, to be connected with a group of students, such as a team, the entire class or other grouping of students. *Vicarious connection* describes incidents of students implicitly sensing a connection, or the potential for connection, even in the absence of experiencing direct one-on-one interaction with a staff member. One participant describes the paradox that connections cannot be assumed or forced, while concurrently having the potential to be achieved indirectly:

> Nothing's ever going to happen until you have the connections. I don't mean that you have to have a connection with every student in your class, because that's not going to happen. But even if the student that didn't connect with you notice that you have a connection with someone else, they know you care. (NTS)

Though the student, or group of students, may not have a deeply personal connection with the staff person, they are highly perceptive and may choose to step through a door opened by a staff person by providing some opportunity for the student to share about themselves, make and learn from mistakes, realize their potential, interests or passion in some subject, provided some validation, encouragement to explore their identity in a new way, or to simply reach out for support when needed. Thus, the *vicarious* and *collective connections* are examples of the interactional component of the school-based ecological space created by staff.

Underlying properties: Intentionality, authenticity and responsive attentiveness. *Intentionality*, *authenticity* and *responsive attentiveness* emanate from the data as fundamental properties of the *Creating Space* theory. *Intentionality*, which could also be considered a spatial dimension as it may be colloquially or affectionately referred to as *heart-space,* as one participant stated, "just going with your heart-to-heart. That heart-to-heart piece" (NTS). Participants in this study all espoused a relationship-first philosophy, rather than focusing solely on academic-related outcomes; this student-centric approach is a critical component of the underlying, intrinsic intentionality they described. *Authenticity* is difficult to define and may have multiple dimensions (Malm, 2008), but for the purpose of this study can be defined as essentially the uninhibited truth or completeness of oneself that is expressed through genuine intentions and actions. It is an integral component of how participants approach *all* interactions with students. Every participant indicated, directly or indirectly via anecdotes and observed actions, that the "authenticity piece is huge" (T) and as one participant summarized, to "be myself" (T) is her approach to connecting. All participants also alluded to an awareness or noticing of students and their needs, which was virtually always accompanied by a response, thus termed as *responsive attentiveness.* Staff are not simply paying attention to subtle cues, but they follow with an action. Many participant quotes support this property (e.g., "whenever I can, to pull kids aside and notice something," (T); "noticing if a kid comes in dragging their feet in the morning that normally doesn't. 'Hey, is everything okay today?'" (T).

Intrapersonal Processes **Spatial Dimensions and Interpersonal SSC Process**

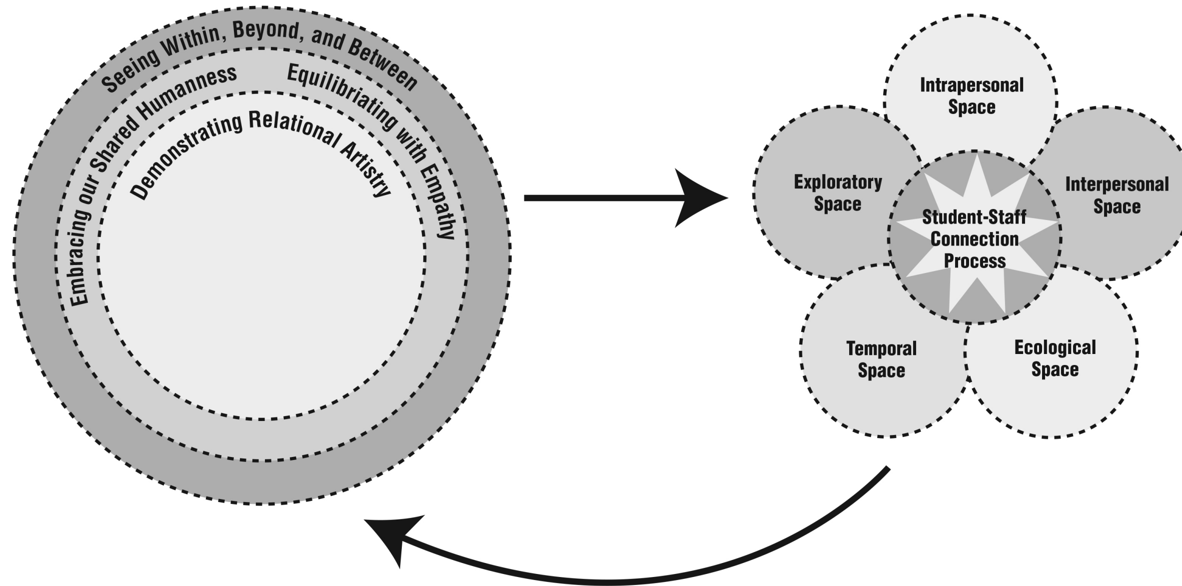

Figure 1. The Creating Space Theoretical Model

Table 1

Descriptions and Data Representing the Spatial Dimensions of the Creating Space Theory

Spatial Dimensions: Description	**Data Excerpts**
Intrapersonal: Space for students to engage in holistic intrapersonal development.	“[I]n middle school, it's like, 'Okay, who am I?' is what they're thinking; so just kinda giving them that comfort zone, and giving them the permission not to know, or the permission to be wrong, and then be able to you know, go from there.” (T)
Interpersonal: Relational interactions between staff and students.	“I just make sure they feel comfortable when they come in. I find out what they need. Some kids, just coming to the office makes them nervous, so I'm going to make sure that they know it's comfortable and it's a safe place to come. Whether it's a little question or a big question, anything going on, they can come and talk.” (NTS)
Temporal: Provide students enough time, temporal space, to engage in exploration, to take advantage of opportunities, and to have time to interact with staff on a meaningful level.	“Some of the kids that come quite often, a lot of times it's just that need for connection, and they know that a lot of times as nurses we have time to connect with them. Teachers have to teach, they have a curriculum, they have guidelines they have to get done, and they have 25 other kids in a class. You know here, we can give them one-on-one attention; so sometimes for that kid that has anxiety or is just having a bad day, they know they can come to the health office as a getaway and maybe rest for 10 minutes, and take a break, take some deep breaths, rejuvenate.” (NTS) -
Ecological: A combination of the interactional milieu and physical space (structures, posters, decor, seating, etc.).	*Interactional: “*So when I make a classroom with kids that are struggling, I know the very first thing I need to do is get to know them, and I need to get their engagement, and I need to find out what I can have in my classroom that's going to make them be excited to come there every day, and I need to make an environment that's going to make them welcome, and make them feel good about it.” (NTS – formerly in a teaching role) *Physical:* “They just need somebody to help them feel safe; they need somebody to go to; and they need a place to escape to when they’re in that mood, because they’re going to get in that mood. It’s guaranteed. It’s not if, it’s when (laughs).” (T)
Exploratory: A space of discovery, exploration, critical thinking, perspective-taking, as well as tapping creativity and intuition, ultimately linking back to the development of inter- and intrapersonal space.	“We do have social justice projects out there [points to hall], so I try to touch on subjects that get down and a little deeper. That also really helps with my relationships is that I get to see these kids in a different light, creating things that really mean things to them. We talk a lot about race in my class. We do talk about socioeconomic status. We talk about how they are scared to go to high school because of this, that or the other. I try to get deeper than just ‘how was basketball this weekend?’” (T)

Note. NTS = Non-teaching staff and T = Teacher.

Creating Space (Core Category)

These middle school staff described creating space which intrinsically generates countless potential *connection-catalysts* or triggers, unique to each student, that may spark connectedness. The relationship-building process is organic and genuine. Creating Space is enacted through four sub-processes (sub-categories), occurring at three different levels on a continuum from practical to abstract, namely (a) an expanding awareness-level process of *seeing within, beyond, and between*; (b) two translational-level processes described as *embracing our shared humanness*, and *equilibrating with empathy*; and (c) a praxis-level process of *demonstrating relational artistry*. These processes are interdependent and interact synergistically as staff establish connectedness with, and convey belief, care, and reverence towards, middle school students. Expanding awareness refers to a relatively abstract process of knowing, understanding and recognizing self and others. The knowing or seeing that occurs within one's expanding awareness is interpreted through the individual's engagement in translational-level processes; thus, translating that awareness and personhood into practice by way of equilibrating with empathy and embracing our shared humanness. The level of praxis, demonstrating relational artistry, constitutes the more concrete, observable, practice-level relational actions, arguably an artistic endeavor, school staff employ as a way to relate to and connect with students. These actions are student centered and directed, therefore inherently interpersonal, and transform into the creation of a multidimensional space within which the SSC process occurs, centered around a trigger, yielding a key to unlock the door to connectedness.

Expanding awareness subcategories: Seeing within, beyond and between. The multi-level, interdependent processes that constitute Creating Space arise from and manifest differently for each participant. Their individual interpretation, and translation of that interpretation (translational-level) into tangible action (praxis-level), appears to be grounded in fundamental, behind-the-scenes processes presented below.

Discovering and trusting innate wisdom: Seeing within (oneself and others). Participant interview and observational data support the presence of a level of intuition and profound knowing of themselves, and of appreciating the same in students, a phenomenon akin to wisdom and appearing to be relatively innate. It is reasonable to infer a level of phronesis, or wisdom, that then manifests as their signature demonstration of *relational artistry*. Thus, the concept of rediscovering and trusting innate wisdom, though at times forgotten or unintentionally distanced from, is what participants draw upon within this level of expanding awareness. As one participant shared,

> After three years, you get to know the kids pretty good, so you kind of know. You can tell if they're having a really bad day; they come in and sit. You can just tell by looking at them they don't want to talk. I give them some time to cool down. (NTS)

Participants often report instinctively knowing what to do with or for a student, summoning creativity and individualizing their in-the-moment responses, simply by seeing students wholly and listening deeply, *seeing within*. The following excerpt from observational notes exemplifies how *seeing within* is put into practice:

> It is as if the participant could "read" this student, but it took a moment for her to figure out what he needed. In one look and one comment about not having to be perfect she was able to convey her expectations that he try, her belief and confidence in him and address any potential underlying fear/anxiety/self-consciousness around his ability to do the task. (NTS).

The memo accompanying this observation, annotated in NVIVO during analysis, elaborates:

> [W]ithout patience and the ability to see beyond, read into, listen (without words) she would have missed the cue of what this student needed. She was able to take

> the time for perspective empathy and guess what he needed to hear. She also believed in his wisdom, and her own, to know what to do.

Staff tap into this intuitive reservoir in order to create space, believing students have the same capacity, and trusting they can "let them [students] chart their way" (NTS). Analogously, one teacher describes seeing and trusting students' awareness, whether conscious or not, of what they need: "I feel like sometimes the kids who have . . . who need the connection at school the most, let you know in subtle ways" (T).

Seeing beyond circumstances, behavior and conditions/somatic complaints (seeing beyond). In order to more completely *see within* students, participants *see beyond*. *Seeing beyond* and *seeing within* have a bidirectional relationship as participants are more fully able to recognize the personhood of each student, by seeing that they are more than their circumstances, behaviors, health conditions or academic outcomes. Staff achieve this through deep listening and noticing, having an awareness of adolescent development principles, and putting professional development education, such as trauma-informed training, into practice. *Seeing beyond* may then mean being able to see and interpret students' behaviors as signposts to an underlying concern or need:

> The behavior is generally a symptom of something else, so really I always feel that my role is to figure out what is really going on. What is the reason behind the behavior? What is it that you're trying to tell me? And a lot of times, they're trying to tell us this is what they need, or they're trying to tell us this is what's happened and this is my reaction to a certain stimulus, and things like that. So when I find that information out, it generally allows me to know, okay, well then this is what I need to do with this student, or this is how I need to approach this student. (NTS)

Seeing beyond and *seeing within* are critical to interpreting situations and employing the wisdom participants actualize in an authentic way.

Yet another participant describes seeing beyond in a broader sense with regard to judgments others in the district or community may have of the students in the school she works in, but she sees beyond these perceived notions, "Yeah, that the student population is ick or whatever. I don't know how to describe it. It's sad, because our kids are great. They just need a lot more love than a lot of other kids do "(T). *Seeing beyond* also describes the staff members' capacities to more fully *see within* students, and others they encounter in their professional role including other staff and families, by purposefully seeking to understand and act on circumstances, interconnectedness, and betweenness.

Recognizing interconnectedness (seeing between). Recognizing interconnectedness can be described as a demonstrated awareness and a holistic view of the innumerable factors influencing SSC, with a recognition of the space between, betweenness, wherein lies the understanding of the implications flowing within and from the interconnected factors that ultimately impact the individual student and/or the student's relationships. There is a level of recognition of interconnection *and* a metaphorical "reading between the lines". Participants recognize the links between such factors and are able to interpret and translate that understanding of the, sometimes obscure, betweenesses into their intentions and interactions with students, families and systems. The awareness and reconciling of interconnectedness in and of itself seems to be the key to their ability to see the big picture, critical to the practical application of this theory. Beyond the individual student focus, the following excerpt depicts an interconnected view with an acknowledgement of the interactions or relations between each of the process-influencing factors:

> I think there is a bigger connection between students feeling connected at school and their success, obviously, moving through school; but that home-to-school piece is huge, and we haven't figured out how to bridge that gap. Sometimes our kids who seem neediest here are missing something probably at home; we just

don't know how to connect them to the services or how to get the family to maybe look at what we're doing here a little bit differently. . . why are kids not wanting to come to school, and, when they're here, why are they maybe feeling not very engaged. . . (T)

Translational sub-categories: Embracing our shared humanness and equilibrating with empathy. The two translational processes *embracing our shared humanness* and *equilibrating with empathy* essentially serve as individualizing-filters through which *seeing within, beyond and between* is personalized and then channeled into their interactions with students at the praxis-level. One study participant clearly expresses the first of these intermediary processes by stating the importance of "making yourself human" (T).

Embracing our shared humanness. Participants not only acknowledge and accept, but embrace all aspects of our humanness and are able to see this mirrored in students. They do this by being genuine, being open and reflective, embracing imperfections and mistake-making, engaging lightheartedly, and knowing and being known by others.

Being genuine. Being genuine is a behavior that demonstrates being comfortable, honest, and authentic. Translating expanding awareness (i.e. seeing within, beyond and between) into practice through embracing our humanness requires staff to tap into who they are and what their experiences are, and to use the knowledge gained in this reflection to build connections in an authentic way.

> I've never not tried to be me. When observing other teachers, taking in what they do and what works from their classroom, and saying, okay, how can I get that type of thing across, but still me being me and authentic as I can be. Because kids know if you're trying to fake it, and the moment you fake it, you are [laughs] *done*. They're not going to buy into anything that you do. (T)

This participant, describes the necessity of genuineness, “just be authentic, 'Oh, this is who I am.' Kids, especially kids that grew up in poverty, they know. They can sense fake“ [NTS], recognizing that students who have experienced or live in challenging circumstances are very intuitive, and can sense when adults are not being authentic.

> I really try to find out what the kids' interests are without being too fake about it, if that makes sense, because the one thing about our population is a lot of them don't have a great home life. So they're looking for that connection, they want someone to care about them, but also, if you're fake about it, they will pick you up like (snaps), and then it's over. (T)

Another participant describes a movement towards one’s true self (i.e. *discovering and trusting the wisdom within; seeing within*) the insight, openness and ability to shift towards a more expansive awareness as he describes: “if I'm looking totally over the last 12, 15 years, I think it's just a matter of finding who you are” (T). In this statement he alludes to authenticity as well as personal insight and an ability to shift that comes with openness and inner-reflection and ultimately benefits his connections with students.

Being open and reflective. Being open and reflective is an innate and uniquely human capacity that promotes both an expanding awareness and accompanying actions. The ability to “keep it as real as possible” (T) (e.g., authentic, genuine), results from one's level of openness or receptiveness to embracing self-reflection and to integrate new ideas and actions into one’s self/being as described by this participant:

> I become more reflective. I think I've grown emotionally just through time because of various challenges in my life, so then I reflect on them. . . .You just become wiser. . . But just having, just being mindful allows you to know what the next step is, like how you are going to approach the situation. (T)

She speaks to trust in an evolving wisdom that comes with openness and self-reflection. This sentiment is affirmed in the following conversation:

> R: We all have those things that we need to work on or be aware of things, our emotions and things like that.
>
> I: So that's something that you do? You personally reflect on some of those things or you...
>
> R: Yeah. That's what I reflect on, and with kids. . . . Because kids have the truth. They say the truth. And some kids are talking back, but sometimes they're telling the truth and we need to reflect on our own practices. (NTS)

Embracing imperfections and mistake-making. This property of the *embracing our shared humanness* subcategory is tied to participants' levels of openness and reflexivity, and being able to accept, acknowledge and ultimately embrace their own imperfections, and those of students, and doing so without judgment.

> So we spend a lot of time at the beginning of the year trying to building confidence, like, it's okay to take a risk, it's okay to be wrong, and we learn more from mistakes. Like if a kid makes a mistake, okay, let's talk about that, like what happened. (T)

Therein she creates temporal space to explore (exploratory space) in which students can explore and learn in an interactional space imbued with belief, care, and reverence, contributing to ecological space that promotes a safe and empowering classroom community and climate conducive to academic taking risks (this participant also displayed myriad positive messages around her classroom), and ultimately intrapersonal space where individual growth occurs, promoting learning, the development of social-emotional skills, internal assets, and the like.

Participants in this study repeatedly recounted stories of their attempts to *Create Space* for students to explore, take risks and make mistakes, while owning their own flaws and

fallibility. They also went a step further by appreciating their subsequent learning after experiencing a misstep as this participant describes “there are some days where I light them up, and the next day I have to come back and go 'you know what, I was really upset’” (T). Paradoxically, their good intentions do not always result in the intended outcome (e.g. “intent doesn't always equal impact“ [NTS]), thus further emphasizing the necessity of an expanded awareness and an ability to recognize and acknowledge how students, or others, may have perceived their action, followed by a sincere consideration of how to adapt accordingly. Though participants would acknowledge their mistakes to themselves, and often role model this capacity to acknowledge ones’ faults as they confess to students, the data also reveals a call for self-compassion as staff attempt to balance their countless responsibilities with connection-building efforts: “I take it too much to heart that I get frustrated with me when I know it's probably not me; it's the relationship, or it's the kid, or . . .I take it on that it's my fault” and says that is something she is “still working on after 25 years of teaching” (T).

Engaging lightheartedly. Engaging lightheartedly is the way in which participants engage in authentic uses of humor and general lightheartedness. As these participants succinctly state, “You’ve got to be able to be silly and be stupid” (T); I think in the way that I approach my classes as a whole, I try to be silly” (T); “But it's little things, making connections, sharing goofy stories, laughing at yourself’ (T); and this is not unique to teachers, as a non-teacher articulates, “we make different relationships with these kids, so we have to goof around with them, too” (NTS). Tapping into the shared human capacity to cope and find joy, meaning and community through humor and lightheartedness was a dominant theme throughout the interviews and observations. This is highlighted in the following anecdote, “Somebody told me, too, early on, 'Don't take yourself too seriously. Don't ever try to be more mature ...' I mean, you are naturally more mature than the students, but don't ever try to act like you're above their silliness” (T). Again, staff are guided by their level of awareness, limited or expanding, as they individualize

their interactions with students through this translational process by employing direct or sometimes self-deprecating humor, lighthearted non-academic discussions, playfulness in the classroom setting, or things like including or allowing music during class and endorsing celebrations of all types and for all levels of student success, among other authentically manifested praxis-level actions. Though lightheartedness emerged as a critical component of cultivating connections, a number of participants acknowledge the complicated nature and potential hazards of humor because students' range widely in maturity level and are situated in unique home and social contexts that likely influence their interpretation of such humor. The following participant, among others, speaks to this point:

> Yeah. I think there's a couple of ways that things like that don't go well. You can be joking with a student and they take it the wrong way. I think that sometimes as 6th-grade teachers we assume that their level of communication is at one level, and they may not quite get the sarcasm or the joke, so you have to be a little bit careful with that. (T)

Knowing and being known. Knowing and being known equates to the shared, yet individual and singular, human experience of needing love, belonging, and connection. This sub-process is rooted in the *expanding awareness* level wherein *seeing within, beyond and between* are situated and is demonstrated at the praxis-level with actions such as knowing a students name and specific interests or activity involvement; likewise, the students know the staff person has children or enjoys bowling or poetry, for example. To know and be known is a deeper and more nuanced knowing of one another that channels wisdom through this translational-level, resulting in a comprehensive knowing of someone. This knowing then aids in direct interaction, again with an undercurrent of *intentionality, attentive responsiveness* and *authenticity*. To know and be known helps staff *see within, beyond and between*. This "seeing" is reciprocated and ultimately enhances the level of "knowing" and the ensuing actions occurring at the level of *relational*

artistry and within the SSC process itself. In this quote the initial interaction creates the opening for more depth to follow: "Yeah, but just trying to see them as people and recognizing what their interests are, or what their things are that make them special and talking to them about that, and then they start to respond" (T). In this excerpt we see how *to know* a student may include sharing of oneself, therefore *being known*, and how the simple act of noticing is part of the relational artistry equation. The "knowing" then progresses: It's that you know them beyond them just sitting in my classroom. I think that's where it comes from. You see them as like a person versus just that student sitting there" (T). This participant also identified the need to know their individual classes and uniquenesses as a way to connect, or prevent disconnection:

> In my fourth-hour class I can do a lot more fooling around with them and joking around with them, because they're more lighthearted and they're more easy-going, where in my 5-6, my team class, I've got to be careful with that, because they are a little bit more sensitive. . . . So each class has its own dynamic. (T)

Equilibrating with empathy. In order to effectively connect with students participants demonstrated and describe a need for finding balance in various areas of their professional role and personal life, which was accomplished by their capacity to shift and adapt with profound empathy. For the purpose of explicating the important nuances of each concept comprising this category, while honoring both their respective origins and their wholeness, *balancing and shifting (i.e. equilibrating),* with an interweaving of *empathy*, are described separately.

Balancing. Equilibrating is finding balance by way of shifting. The way in which staff achieve balance, and the categories of balance they shared during the interview and observation sessions, is unique to each person; however, a few consistent balancing themes surfaced: (a) academics and relationship-building with students, (b) group versus individual student needs, (c) personal and professional, and (d) "structure and love".

Academic-relationship-building balance. Though all participants regard their relationships with students as a critical contributor to academic and other related developmental and behavioral outcomes at school, they also struggle with how to efficiently, effectively and authentically connect with students while meeting academic standards and individual students' needs from a holistic perspective.

> I think there are some teachers that are stressed out because of the state test, so they have to get through their curriculum, they have to get to a certain point because that's on the state test; or some teachers that are, they're here to teach because they love their topic; whereas some teachers are here because they love kids. I think you can have a combination of both. You can meet in the middle somewhere. I'm just more on the end of the relationship side of it. (T)

Group-individual balance. Providing individualized attention while tending to the needs of a classroom, student group or the student population as a whole, surfaced as a universal struggle. Many participants articulated this balancing act with examples of specific incidents, as exemplified by the following excerpt.

> I made a comment just last week to admin about this, because I was dealing with him so much, I felt like I didn't talk to anybody else in the class. And I said at some point I have to sever that for the day and say let me get to my class, because my class needs me also. So I try not to let one person make the whole class. (T)

At the same time, having an individual connection with students may partially mitigate the challenge of striking an individual-group balance. The data indicates that the connection between a staff member and a student, regardless of any other accompanying observable or quantifiable outcomes, may be seen in and of itself as consequential. Anecdotally, participants frequently associated connectedness with an improvement in academic achievement, increased academic

motivation, a greater willingness to try new things and take risks or to share stories and interests to a greater extent; however, of equal or greater value from a whole-person, whole-systems perspective may be what I labeled in this study as *reciprocal reverence* illustrated in the following example in which this teacher participant describes a student she is struggling to connect with will tell other students "'chill out. Let Miss (name redacted) give you a book.' He goes, 'I don't like reading either, but it's Miss [name redacted]'" (T). She goes on to describe the balance one student and the needs of the class, as well as her own need for self-care, self-preservation, segueing to the challenges of achieving personal-professional balance:

> So I know I'm almost there. He's a current and I'm swimming upstream with him and sometimes I'm too tired and I take a break and I let him check out, because I need that mental refresher, too, and I need to focus on a hundred other kids. (T)

Personal-professional balance. Multiple participants described intention and struggle associated with balancing commitment to students and their own, for example: "I try not to take on too much, but I felt passionate about it" (T); " not getting overinvested, because when you really, really love working with kids, and you love having relationships with them and you love getting to know them, you get so overly invested" (T); and lastly, with a touch of lightheartedness, another participant states "I do less of those now [extracurricular activity] . . . trying to budget my time better instead of doing everything all the time" (T).

Structure and love. "*Structure and love"* (NTS) encapsulates the numerous narratives and actions that indicate a need for developmentally appropriate, caring expectations:

> I'm a firm believer in that they need to know boundaries, and you need to be somewhat firm, but they kind of want that. It's almost a security thing. Kids say they don't, but it provides them a path, and where to go, so they can be accountable, but yet warm. I think it's a fine balance. I think there's a fine balance

there that you really have to ... It's like, no, you look them in the eye, you show them you care, but at the same time you need to be firm. . . I think you need to have that control, but yet open arms. . . There has to be structure, and *love* [gentle voice]. (NTS)

Expectations was a term used frequently and quite broadly, conceptualized as predictability, consistency, and boundary-setting, among a host of other descriptions, which staff noted as a way to connect by providing structure and routine that are comforting and developmentally appropriate for students, thus setting the tone in their classroom, office or other interactional space. Ultimately, these are all, including the two following excerpts, variations of *structure and love*.

They further described setting high-expectations as a way to motivate, empower and show belief in and respect for students' potential. Achieving a balance between expectations, including accountability when necessary and some flexibility (shifting) on the part of the staff, as well as caring or "love", reportedly results in more supportive, productive and authentic connections, because as one participant stated, "Everyone rises to expectations" (NTS).

Shifting. Shifting is the means by which participants are able to find balance, thus equilibrating. This requires an awareness that a shift is indicated, how and when one needs to adjust or try a different approach or method, and some creativity to respond to students' needs. Participants indicate that such shifts depend on being oneself, genuine and authentic, yet stretching beyond one's comfort zone (e.g. "being willing to step out of our comfort zones to meet them where they are rather than say okay fourteen-year-olds, come act like adults" [T]). This shifting is influenced by higher-level awareness, but occurs primarily at the translational level that is unique to each staff person, then playing out in practice (i.e. praxis-level *Demonstrating Relational Artistry*), with cyclical, bidirectional feedback flowing between and through each of the model's permeable levels and process-influencing ecological factors. As with

balancing, participants express countless ways in which shifting is understood and acted upon. Broadly, the data indicates shifting occurs either externally (e.g. behavior and actions) or intrapersonally (e.g. insight, introspective exploration). Though ultimately inextricable, the external and intrapersonal shifting (reframing), including the concept of *perception/perspective empathy*, are differentiated in the following section as a way to provide conceptual clarity.

External shifting: Solution seeking, creative problem solving, and "sideways" approaches. Staff either instinctively, or intentionally, alter their actions in ways that veer them towards a state of equilibrium in a given situation or circumstance, with connection and student-centeredness being at the core, and typically imbued with empathy. Many participants talk about and demonstrate an ability to share enough about themselves, but not "over share", offering only what is relevant to the student or family they are communicating with. They show care by providing *structure and love* through gentle reminders to students, without assumption or judgment, when students may be off track. They seek creative solutions to immediately solve problems by shifting their reactions or at times strategically engaging students "sideways" (e.g. "So we can really come at them sideways, which a lot of our kids need" (T). In fact, much of what they do could be deemed as "sideways" approaches, and *Creating Space* is ultimately a sideways approach to cultivating connections.

An openness and willingness to engage in shifting, and to do so from a place of authenticity, helps staff link their own perception of situations or interactions with what they know about youth developmentally, and what they see within that student. They look beyond the immediate circumstances, and then translate that integrated understanding into their approach with the student.

> I think, I believe it's always been the adult's job to shift. I think one of the biggest struggles we have in middle school, particularly, . . .is that adults have this need (emphasis on need) to not shift: like 'I'm in control, I'm the authority,

> and I'm not going to shift.' . . .they need empathetic and compassionate right then, and you need to shift that. (NTS)

Pragmatically, the external-shifts that manifest as praxis-level actions aimed at equilibrating (i.e. shifting and balancing) are provoked by participants' level of awareness and intrapersonal insight. Grounded in study data, the concept of *perspective/perception empathy* surfaced as how staff make such inner-shifts.

Intrapersonal reframing: Perception/perspective empathy. Participants alluded to a general notion of empathy as a virtue underlying their work with students in the school setting, sometimes indirectly and other times by specifically identifying empathy (e.g. "I guess, you know, I try to practice what I preach about listening with empathy" (T)). However, much of the data points towards a more nuanced conceptualization of empathy that manifests in an ability to reframe their view and understanding of what they see and experience. Perception (how something is perceived or experienced) and perspective (how something is regarded; one's point of view), are separate but mutually influential. An assumption of the *perception/perspective empathy* concept, is that the awareness of one's own, and acknowledging the existence of others', unique perceptions and perspectives is an antecedent. Moreover, the enhanced *intrapersonal space* that is created allows the staff member to recognize the mindset (intention) of the student. This conceptualization of a more intra-personalized empathy leads into that higher-level awareness, the connection to intuition and our ability to become more conscious as a critical piece of creating space. One participant told the following story that exemplifies not only his ability to *see within, beyond and between*, but a transference of his own *perception/perspective empathy* to students:

> I gave them four Post-it notes and a fifth one, and I wrote on there 1-2-3-4, and I said, 'Okay, you have to do random acts of kindness for four people that you don't know that well . . . I want you to give that back to me on Friday.' I did some

> of those approaches, and then I'll sit down and process it with the kid, saying, 'Okay, here's what you did. You told somebody that you liked their answer that they gave in class. How did that person react? How do you think that made them feel? Okay, now let's think about how did that make you feel when you made them feel good?' and practice some of those pieces, so that um, it's some of those things you don't always think about. Has it been successful? I don't know. But it's been good to have some of those conversations with kids, and I think next time, all of a sudden they do something, and then they can stop and think about, 'Okay, how are you making this person feel? How are you feeling yourself when that happened? If you reversed roles, how would you have felt if you were in that spot?' (NTS)

Achieving balance, truly equilibrating, generally requires a shift of some type, and in this study the participants do this with an underlying empathy, and embracing their own and a shared human experience, and their actions, reflections and reactions. Thus, though a shift towards balance tends to happen naturally, it may also be intentional and therefore malleable, potentially augmented through learning/intervention and enhanced by heightened levels of empathy.

Demonstrating relational artistry. The overarching *Creating Space* theory describes the less visible or appreciable sub-processes that are antecedents to *Student-Staff Connection (SSC)*. *Demonstrating relational artistry,* hereafter referred to as *relational artistry*, is the level within which the more visible *SSC* sub-process takes place. This category characterizes how staff demonstrate *relational artistry* by both the *conveying belief, care, and reverence sub-process* and the *SSC sub-process*. Table 2 provides an overview of the categorical structure, related properties, and the SSC sub-process phases.

Table 2

Summary of the ***Creating Space*** *(core category/process) Categories and Subcategories*

Level	Category	Sub-Categories and Properties
Expanding Awareness	Seeing within, beyond, and between	Discovering and trusting the innate wisdom in oneself and others (*seeing within*) Seeing beyond circumstances, behaviors and conditions (*seeing beyond*) Recognizing interconnectedness (*seeing between*)
Translational	Embracing our shared humanness	Being genuine Being open and reflective Embracing imperfections and mistake-making Engaging lightheartedly Knowing and being known
	Equilibrating with empathy	Balancing • Academics with student relationship-building • Group versus individual student needs • Personal and professional • "Structure and love" (expectations and care) Shifting • External: solution seeking, creative problem solving, and "sideways" approaches • Internal reframing: perception/perspective empathy
Praxis	Demonstrating relational artistry	Conveying belief, care, & reverence • Building community • Empowering • Engaging through relevance • Gentle persistence • Noticing, asking, and listening • Person-centeredness • Playfulness • Presence • Setting and modeling expectations & accountability • Sharing about oneself Student-staff connection (SSC) process • Phase 1: Intention/Hoping • Phase 2: Initial encounter • Phase 3: Circling back • Phase 4: Expanding • Phase 5: Impact • Continuous: Assessing and reassessing

Note. Conveying care belief, & reverence actions were all frequently identified through the data, as such they are presented alphabetically.

Conveying care, believe and reverence. This subcategory is categorized and enacted through (a) building community, (b) empowering, (c) engaging through relevance, (d) gentle persistence, (e) noticing, asking, and listening, (f) person-centeredness, (g) playfulness, (h) presence, (i) setting and modeling expectations and accountability, and (j) sharing about oneself. These actions influence how the SSC process develops and manifests.

Student-staff-connection (SSC). The original impetus for this study was to shed light on the process staff go through as they attempt to connect with students. Notably, in addition to the more descriptive SSC process that emerged as more of a descriptive micro-theory, data revealed SSC as a sub-process occurring within the broader, and paradoxically simple yet complex, core social process of cultivating connections by creating space. The SSC process phases include: (a) intention/hope; (b) initial encounter; (c) circling back; (d) expanding, and (e) impact. At the center of these phases are numerous connection-catalysts emerging from within the space created by staff, that has the potential to spark connection. The SSC sub-process is in essence co-created between students, staff and others because though it may typically be initiated by a staff member, there is some level of co-creation due to schools being interactive social spaces by nature.

Discussion

This study aimed to support ongoing adolescent health and wellbeing-oriented research and practice by exploring, understanding and moving towards a theoretical explanation of the social process(es), and process-influencing factors, underlying the SSC phenomenon from the perspectives of school personnel in middle school settings. The resulting integrative theory, Creating Space, describes the ways in which middle-school staff participants, regardless of role, engage in cultivating connections with students. It emphasizes participants' ability to see within, beyond and between, in other words tapping into their expanding-awareness, achieved through introspection and honoring the wisdom in others, non-judgmental reflection and "seeing", or deep listening, and recognizing individual, interactional and contextual interconnectedness. This

ongoing process occurs while individuals embrace the shared humanness that we all experience. They simultaneously equilibrate with empathy by shifting their perceptions and perspectives while finding balance in all aspects of personal and professional life, as well as a critical balance between expectations and care for students through "structure and love" (308, NTS). The expanding-awareness and translational-level processes contribute to, and are reciprocative with, how school staff then demonstrate their relational capabilities in an authentic, artistic way, with intentionality and responsive attentiveness. This is simplified in the acronym SEED (i.e. See; Embrace; Equilibrate with Empathy; and Demonstrate), or SEEDing, for simplicity and usefulness (see Appendix I).

Significance and situatedness. Findings from this study provide a model that explicates SSC at a micro-process level as well as a theoretical framework of Creating Space in which SSC can occur. The Creating Space theory describes numerous unique but interdependent social and intrapersonal processes that lead to the creation of a multidimensional space ripe with potential connection-catalysts. The perception of being connected with others is a central contributor to health and wellbeing at any stage of life, with particular importance during adolescence (O'Brien, & Bowles, 2013). The benefits of CAY connections, especially between students and staff in school settings, are profound; yet, despite the many existing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing "developmental relationships" (Search Institute, 2018b) and in school (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Scales, 1999; CDC, 2009; Blum, 2005; McNeely et al., 2002) little is known about how they develop.

A significant contribution of this study to the understanding of SSC in schools is that the process cannot be forced or contrived and that it must develop organically. As described earlier, current research and literature offers recommendations of what staff and schools should do to connect with students (Blum, 2005; CDC, 2009a,b; Scales, 1999), but this study reframes that obligatory, structured approach to one of opportunity. Practical actions taken by study

participants are in line with school connectedness recommendations, often exactly replicating them, but what this study shows is that there is more depth than simply acting, and those actions are linked to a deeper intrapersonal experience of each staff person, the student's own needs and desires (or not) for connection, and influenced by a host of ecological factors. Specifically, study data indicates that caring adults are not able to, nor should they be expected to, "make" or force connections because connecting is inherently relational and reciprocal. Students have varying levels of need and desire for connection, and the actions, words, environment, experience, or other input that may trigger a sense of being connected with a caring adult in school is unique to each student, which is something that we have not found explicitly described in extant literature.

Though this study did not directly include student participants, a few recent studies have explored components of CAY relationships from the perspective of young people (Buehler, Sánchez, Vaclavik, Rodriguez, & Gray, 2018; Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Allen, Rosas-Lee, Ortega, Hang, Pergament & Pratt, 2016; Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016; Whitlock, 2006; Yu, Johnson, Deutsch, & Varga, 2018), and many of the findings align with what participants in this study are attempting to do and convey as they endeavor to connect with students. Findings from our study echo similar concepts of connectedness and relational processes as Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji & Wrights (2012), who, revealed emotional connectedness as the primarily relational dimension including concepts similar to those found in this study such as "attending to" and "believing in" individual students and the class, and "sharing imperfections", among others (p. 256). Similarly, Sands (2011) described shifting toward a transformational relationship culminating in "transformational interdependent engagement" wherein the increasingly reciprocated levels of care and trust allowed students and staff learned together (Sands, 2011, p. 158-159). Our study deepened this work by explicating intrapersonal and ecological factors that are inextricably linked to relational processes, expanding beyond teachers to include other staff.

Another critical finding of this study that adds depth to extant literature is the notion of widening the conceptualization of climate and culture to include the contribution the "intrapersonal "component of Creating Space makes, both of the student and the staff person, to how student-staff connections are cultivated. Though the idea of Creating Space may, at first glance, be somewhat akin to, and is of course inextricably linked to, the concepts of school culture and climate, this integrative theory reaches beyond those umbrella concepts by suggesting multiple types of space and layers of dynamic social processes that go into Creating Space, as well as the resulting potential connection catalysts. The space created by staff in this study is comprised of five dimensions that are conditionally labeled as intrapersonal, interpersonal, temporal, ecological, and exploratory. They are described as being "conditional" because they are derived from the specific data and circumstances within which this particular study is situated, so it is anticipated that the spatial dimensions may be modified with future research in other contexts. Notably, isolating these dimensions and processes that unfold through Creating Space is challenging from a whole-systems perspective due to the interconnected and interdependent nature of the model; however, assigning language and attempting to delineate and conceptually describe dimensions and processes is essential for a thorough understanding of SSC as a phenomenon and offers a pathway forward for future research and potential intervention. The spatial dimensions of this model are similar to other school environment or climate models in in that they are focused on connectedness from an ecological perspective; yet, they align with and expand beyond the National School Climate Council (2007) definition, the social and ecological structures described by Waters et al., (2009), and the concept of emotional literacy that "underpins the relational quality that promotes school connectedness and resilience" as part of the ecological of school wellbeing (Roffey, 2008, p. 37).

Of particular significance is the finding that acknowledges directly, rather than by assumption, that the relational process of connecting with students primarily arises from the

intrapersonal experience and actions of each staff member and student, playing out in unique relational patterns that ebb and flow depending on the expansiveness of the staff person's awareness. *Intentionality, authenticity* and *responsive attentiveness*, underlying properties of this model, are in one way intuitive, yet have also been explored in educational and health literature domains. On the surface, from a nursing perspective, intentionality, can be understood as purpose, while intention and intent are more aligned with synonyms of goal and plan, respectively, and from a Native American nursing worldview "balance and harmony" are achieved through connectedness, inextricably linked with intentionality through connectedness" (Lowe, 2002, p. 4). Work by Clark, 2016; Pilkington, 2005; Sofhauser, 2016; Watson, 2002; Zahourek, 2004 also explore intentionality from nursing and medicine perspectives. Many of the sub-categories presented in the Creating Space theory proposed in this article (e.g. intentionality, caring, interconnectedness, empathy, compassion, and authenticity) are consistent with Clark (2016) and Watson's (2002) Human Caring Theory. *Authenticity* is a concept that is explored in, and described as a critical relational factor across many disciplines including nursing (Lowe, 2002; Clark 2016; Watson, 2002) and education (Kreber, Klampfleitner, McCune, Bayne & Knottenbelt, 2007; Kreber, McCune & Klampfleitner, 2010). Caring is often inherently associated with nursing and health care, but specifically noted as a critical relational aspect of teaching as well (Noddings, 2012; Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). Furthermore, participants describe being attentive to student or circumstantial nuances when relating with students and respond with wisdom, empathy, compassion and sometimes creative problem solving. Though there is no specific literature on the concept of responsive attentiveness, it might be akin to compassion which has been defined as "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering" (Greater Good Science Center at the University of California 2019, para. 2); however it also includes other responsive actions resulting from an attention to students' needs rather than only a response to suffering.

There are similar musings of social-connection process properties across disciplines, but this study contributes evidence to support what is sometimes tacit or assumed.

Lastly, the emerging integrative theory of Creating Space indicates reframing and recognizing interconnectedness are key contributors to connection-building. The expanding-awareness processes of discovering and trusting the innate wisdom in oneself and others (seeing within), seeing beyond circumstances, behaviors and conditions (seeing beyond) and recognizing interconnectedness (seeing between), indicate the need not only for intrapersonal insight, but the ability to see the same capacity in youth. This recognition of interconnectedness, seeing between, allows staff to discover and trust the innate wisdom within themselves and others. Tapping into and recognizing a mutually experienced, deep wisdom bolsters their ability to see beyond academic outcomes, circumstances, behaviors or somatic complaints that students may present with, but also translates that "seeing" into practice in their interactions with students, thus influencing how they are creating space for connection. Though each of the three expanding-awareness level processes are significant, and may even precede seeing between, which would need to be explored in future research, recognizing interconnectedness (seeing between/betweenness) may be particularly integral to cultivating connections through creating space process. Participant interviews and observations revealed their sensitivity to and recognition of both the intricacies of intrapersonal development within themselves and the students, as well as the complexity of students' situations within and outside of school, the range of bio-psycho-social components of adolescent development affecting students' life and learning, as well as the influence of family, community and broader socio-political issues. This conceptualization of recognizing interconnections is novel, not found in school connectedness literature as far as we are aware, however is seemingly consistent with Dr. Siegel's conceptualization of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, n.d., 2009, 2012).

In a post-study exploration of literature, seeing within and beyond, and more specifically the betweenness described as a recognition of the interconnectedness of oneself, relationships to others and the many systems within which one is situated as a critical component of building social connections and wellbeing, is notably aligned with the concept of *integration* within the field of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2012). Interpersonal neurobiology is an interdisciplinary approach, including a range of scientific and other disciplines of knowing, aimed at exploring and understanding the human experience, within which integration is recognized as "the essential mechanism of health as it promotes a flexible and adaptive way of being that is filled with vitality and creativity" (Siegel, n.d., para. 4.). More specifically, Dr. Siegel (2009) states:

> This interconnection between internal acceptance and interconnectedness with a larger world emerges, I believe, from the central process of integration at the heart of mindfulness as it promotes self-and other-focused compassion within healthy development (p. 148.)

More specifically, Siegel (2007) refers to reflections as the "wisdom of reflection", purporting it as "the fourth 'R' of education" and further suggests that "personal well-being and prosocial behavior require that we nurture the capacity for self-understanding and empathy in youth, qualities that emerge from learning to be reflective" (p. 259). This is not only consistent with of our findings, but is relevant for youth and caring adults alike, contributing to the co-learning and engaging between youths and adults throughout the SSC process via *Creating Space.*

Participants also recognized interconnectedness at multiple ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is reasonable to hypothesize that, given the findings from this study, the more profound one's ability to recognize interconnectedness (seeing between) is, the more adept one becomes at engaging in the other identified Creating Space processes and engendering the ability to balance and shift, especially by way of perception/perspective empathy. This is

consistent with empathy literature (Decety & Ickes, 2009; Wiseman, 1996), and results in a comprehensive understanding, and holistic enactment of connection-building.

Limitations and Strengths

A limitation of this study is that although it began with purposeful and then referral sampling, along with theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling of data (Charmaz, 2014), findings only represent participants from two Midwestern, suburban middle-schools in the United States. It is critical to note that this study is limited, though intentional due to the research question, by the lack of student voice. As such, it is important to acknowledge that the process labeled in this study as SSC is meant to explore the phenomenon of how staff develop connections with students, with students' perception of connection being central despite the absence of students in the study, while specifically exploring the process from the perspective of middle-school staff members. Despite the limitations, a major strength of this study is that the majority of existing studies related to staff perspectives on SSC focus on teacher perspectives only, indicating a need to expand to be more inclusion of staff members in multiple roles, all of whom contribute to creating space and have the potential to connect with students. This study also provides a much-needed insight into the inner-workings of the social process staff members engage in as they attempt to connect with students.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Though continued research is needed to explore the potential transferability of these findings to other school settings, student age-groups, geographic locations, or other populations and care environments, our hope is that this nascent theory may be used as a tool for intrapersonal, professional, school and school-system reflection and potential action. This study offers an immediate addition to existing connectedness research, and possible future contributions to the promotion of adolescent health and wellbeing, by providing a preliminary understanding of *how* SSC develops, specifically from the perspective of a range of middle-school staff.

Importantly, any caring adults attempting to connect with youth in school settings, and possibly other settings, may benefit from reframing how they *see* students. Seeing them for who they are rather than their circumstances, somatic complaints, behaviors, or other external biases that may and to see connecting as an opportunity rather than a mandate. That is to say, given a relationship-first philosophy, that they cannot force connections, but they are in control of how they Create Space by SEEDing, through which potential connections might develop.

The Creating Space model has the potential to be used as a reflective tool at the individual level, or as a decision-making guide or reflective tool as schools and districts consider how they want to centralize, prioritize, provide resources for and communicate around student-staff relationships. Schools or districts could us this preliminary model as a way to reflect on what training they may want to offer staff or how they go about writing, and shifting culture, around SSC as a priority. Participants repeatedly stated that "listening" to students was critical to how they connect. Garcia-Moya et al. (2018) calls for further exploration of students' perspectives with respect to teacher connectedness, which is supported by our study as well.

Conclusion

Those working with young adolescents in schools or other settings have an opportunity to directly and indirectly encourage and bolster healthy youth development, promote equity and social justice, and address countless public health issues by *Creating Space* wherein meaningful youth-adult connections are cultivated. Future research is needed to examine the potential transferability of this theory to other schools and grade levels, and possibly to higher-learning institutions serving youth and adults. Nurses are well positioned to lead the way with a grounding in the person-health-environment philosophy while acting as "bridgers", seeing and creating connections in pursuit of collective health and wellbeing.

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Chapter 5

Recognizing and Supporting Student-Staff Connection-Building as a Continuous Relational Process: Linking Theory and Practice to Promote Connectedness and Healthy Youth Development in Middle School

Synopsis

Though healthy relationships between students and caring adults in school settings are developmental assets contributing to healthy youth development and adolescent wellbeing, little is known about *how* such connections develop. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the social process of student-staff connection (SSC). Perspectives were obtained from staff members engaged with students through their varying professional roles in two same-district middle schools. Guided interviews and participant observation sessions with 24 participants resulted in an integrative theory of Creating Space that describes the process of, and influencing factors associated with, SSC. Enhancing the cultivation of connections between caring adults and students in school settings is a fundamental and forward-looking approach to promoting the overall wellbeing of students and school communities as a whole, and one that school nurses can influence given their unique training and situatedness in the education sector. Future research and implications for schools and nurses are discussed at the health-education interface.

Keywords: qualitative research, adolescent health and wellbeing, connectedness, school, grounded theory, middle school, staff

"I do think, if you can ... make those connections, it's going to help overall health and well-being for any of us, but students most importantly." (305, OS)

The work of schools is primarily focused on educating students; however, there is an increasingly holistic view of schools as healthy youth development hubs wherein life skills and wellbeing are prioritized alongside educational achievements (CDC, 2018b; Greenberg et al., 2003; Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015; Marin & Brown, 2008; Rowe, Stewart, & Patterson, 2007). School nurses are central to promoting the health and wellbeing of students, schools, and the communities wherein they reside (Cowell, 2018; Bergren, 2017; National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2018a). Indeed, school nurses are often the first responders addressing countless student health conditions and importantly, two major public health issues that manifest in the microcosm of school settings, namely poor mental health and youth violence (NASN, 2018b; 2018c). Disruptions in mental and emotional wellbeing during adolescence have reached critical levels, and are inextricably linked with, and often antecedent to many health and social issues (Hawkins, et al., 2016; Kieling et al., 2011; World Health Organization [WHO], 2018c). Violence prevention, and the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, including attention to their relation to and impacts of chronic stress (American Public Health Association [APHA], 2018), must be a joint education-health sector effort. Enhancing the cultivation of connections between caring adults and students in school settings is a fundamental and forward-looking approach to promoting the overall wellbeing of students and school communities as a whole, and one that school nurses can facilitate given their unique training and situatedness in the education sector.

Connectedness and Why It Matters

Social connection is a universal contributor to health and wellbeing across the lifespan (Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, & Branscombe, 2009; Seppala, 2014; Synergos, 2014). Decades of adolescent health

research have established the health promoting value of school connectedness, including a sense of belongingness and connection, as well as social connections with peers and teachers (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Allen & Bowles, 2012; García-Moya, Brooks, Morgan, & Moreno, 2015; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997; Resnick, Harris, & Blum; 1993; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; and summarized in the Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2004). Although an abundance of school connectedness research indicating its value and power to positively influence educational outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Klem, & Connell, 2004; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), offset many risk factors and risky behaviors (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997), and is particularly valuable to promoting mental health and wellbeing (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; see also Garcia-Moya et al., 2015; Shochet et al., 2006), many students continue to report feeling disconnected from school (Klem & Connell, 2004) and that they feel their teachers do not care about them. For example, 28% of 8th grade students in Minnesota reported, in 2016, that they disagree or strongly disagree that "most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person" (Minnesota Department of Education [MDH], 2016 and from 2013-2015 data only 32.9% and 27.2% of 7th and 9th grade students, respectively, report high level of caring relationships with adults at school on the California Student Survey (n.d.).

Despite varying school connectedness-related terminology, "relationships in the school environment seem to be the core element shared by all definitions of school connectedness" (Garcia-Moya et al., 2018, p. 6). Importantly, these "developmental relationships", inclusive of caring adult-youth connections in school, have the potential to promote youths' internal assets (Search Institute, 2016) defined as "the personal skills, commitments, and values they need to make good choices, take responsibility for their own lives, and be independent and fulfilled", consisting of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity (Search Institute, 2018a, section 2). Students' perception that they are connected to caring adults

in school, often measured by a perceived connection with teachers, is a key asset that contributes to healthy youth development (Garcia-Moya et al., 2015; Search Institute, 2018b). Focusing on student-staff interactions in middle school settings is important because of the unique developmental nature of the early adolescence years (Forrest, Bevans, Riley, Crespo, & Louis, 2013; McNeely & Blanchard, 2010). Though many studies have focused on teacher-student relationships (Garcia-Moya, 2015; Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997), students interact with numerous other adults throughout their day, including support professionals, lunchroom staff, coaches, and school nurses, among others. So how do these school staff members do what they do, when building relationships and connectedness with middle school students? A nuanced, in-depth investigation of what is happening "behind-the-scenes" of student-staff connectedness (SSC) might contribute to more effective staff connectedness with more students, thus, directly and indirectly impacting student and school wellbeing.

Methods

This constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin, & Strauss, 2008) study explored the perspectives and actions of school staff members regarding their process of connecting with students using one-to-one interviews and participant observations in the school settings. Purposeful and referral sampling, guided by theoretically sensitive data sampling and analysis (Charmaz, 2014) yielded 24 participants from two middle schools.

Participants & Setting

This study was conducted in two middle schools within the same Midwestern metropolitan school district, yet each school has distinct community and student populations. Data was collected over a one-year period using semi-structured interviews (n=24 school staff) and observations (n=45) with the same staff members in their respective roles (e.g., nurses, teachers, administrators and other support staff). Theoretically relevant artifacts and documents

were also considered and reviewed. The 19 participants identifying as female (9 at school A, and 10 at school B) and 5 as male (2 at school A and 3 at school B), ranged in age from 28 to 55 years old. Participant roles included a total of 15 teachers representing various subject areas, 2 nurses (one from each school), 4 administrators, one paraprofessional, one social worker and one office coordinator. Six of the teachers and 5 in non-teaching staff (NTS) professionals worked at school A, and 9 teachers and 4 NTS participants worked at school B. Of the 19 participants that shared self-described race and ethnicity information, one identifies as African-American, and the others as some variation of Non-Hispanic, U.S. born, American, Canadian or European, for ethnicity. In response to race one participant identifies as Asian, one as Black, and all others as White/Caucasian. They all had at least one-year experience working in their identified professional role at the start of the study and many had prior experience working with youth in some capacity. Participants worked in either of two participating middle schools situated within the same school district, so as to have similar district-wide culture and policy-base, but were demographically and geographically unique (see Table 1). School A is situated in a smaller community, whereas School B is in a larger community in a Midwestern metropolitan area.

Table 1

School Demographics

School-Level Demographics	School A (11 participants)	School B (13 participants)
Number of Students	About 700	About 1200
Student Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	12%	8.5%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.1%	0.4%
Asian	7.6%	6.4%
Black or African American	7.6%	5.4%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0%
White	65.2%	72.3%
Two or More Races	7.2%	6.9%
Special populations		
Free/Reduced Lunch	40.2%	21.8%
English Learner	6.2%	3.6%
Special Education	17.5%	11.1%
Homeless	2.2%	0.6%
Ratio of All Licensed Staff to Students	12	15

Note. Data represents 2018-2019 school year (Minnesota Department of Health, 2018)

Data Collection

All data collection was conducted by the primary researcher (WF), a nursing doctoral student, in private locations within the school sites that were selected by the participants. The 24 in-person, guided interviews lasted from just under 10 minutes to more than 68 minutes (mean=37 minutes) and the 45 observation sessions ranged from 25 minutes to 4 hours and 20 minutes (mean time per session = 2 hours and 28 minutes). Artifact assessments and document

collection was completed during interview and observation sessions, or after the session if follow-up was required.

Ethical Considerations

University Institutional Review Board approval, and school district approval, were received prior to initiating recruitment. Written consent was obtained prior to beginning any interviews or observation sessions and a signed copy was provided to each participant. Particular care was taken to address students' confidentiality, as they were not participants of the study but were inevitably a part of observation sessions and staffs' stories during the interviews, by focusing on the interaction rather than specific student stories.

Data Analysis

A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyze data Charmaz, 2014; Corbin, & Strauss, 2008). Analytic methods used to explore, integrate and interpret the data included a progression of line-by-line, focused and theoretical coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, extensive analytic and methodological memoing, process-mapping (Clarke, Friese, &Washburn, 2015), and reflexive journaling. The iterative data collection (approximately 7 months) and analysis took just under two years to complete, at which point the reasonable conclusion of analysis was decided based on categorical saturation (Charmaz, 2014).

Results

Analysis resulted in three main findings, arising from the perspective of participating middle school staff actively engaging in the connection process with students, as well as observations and interpretation of the data by the researcher (WF). First, a descriptively nuanced, theoretical explanation of the SSC process emerged. Secondly, an ecologically situated list of SSC process-influencing factors, generally categorized as supports and challenges, surfaced. Thirdly, and integral to a holistic understanding of SSC, the integrative theory of *Creating Space* unfolded as being the more comprehensive, abstract social process (core category) participants

engage in while attempting to connect with students (See *Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space*). A cursory overview of Creating Space is provided as a way to situate the SSC process within the broader theory; however, SSC, the related process-influencing factors, and their relevance for schools and school nurses are the focus of this article. Data is presented as interview quotations or observational data followed by an indication of the source as being a teacher (T) or non-teaching staff (NTS) member (e.g. nurse, paraprofessional, administrator, etc.).

Cultivating Student-Staff Connections by *Creating Space*: An Integrative Theory/Model

Creating Space, the core category of this constructivist grounded theory study, is a multi-level, interdependent process comprised of the following 4 main categories: (a) an expanding awareness level processes of *[S]eeing within, beyond and between*, (b) two translational level processes of *[E]mbracing our humanness* and *[E]quilibrating with empathy*, and a praxis level process, linking theory and practice, (d) [D]emonstrate relational artistry by conveying their belief, care and reverence for students as they attempt to connect. Participants create intrapersonal (individual-level [for staff and students]), interpersonal (relational between student and/or parents, staff, etc.), ecological (physical and interactional spaces), temporal (time), and exploratory (space for growth and opportunity) spatial dimensions which influence and are influenced by one another, the participant, the social interactions within and outside of school, and related ecological factors. This social process of creating a multi-dimensional space offers multiple SEEDs or sparks, described as *connection-triggers* in this article, that may blossom or ignite into a direct, vicarious, or collective connection to a caring adult at school. Importantly, participants cultivate connections with an underlying intentionality, authenticity, and attentive responsiveness (compassion in action) (See *Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space*).

Demonstrating relational artistry. Demonstrating relational artistry represents participant data that is most proximal to practice, described as the praxis-level category, bridging practice and theory. This category consists of two subcategories. First is *conveying belief in, care for and reverence towards* (CBCR), and the second is the *SSC-process*. An understanding of CBCR and the SSC sub-process are critical to the practical enactment of the praxis-level *relational artistry* within which they are situated. CBCR is described briefly in this results section, but is primarily presented and supported by data in Table 2.

Conveying belief, care and reverence. Though uniquely expressed by the words and actions of each participant in this study, as well as the schools' policies, related documents and other media outputs (artifacts), all data point toward a collective intentionality/desire to convey belief, care and reverence towards students (e.g. ''hey, I believe in you" [T]), which is in essence the outcome they aspire towards with the space they have created for student-staff connectedness to blossom. Data indicates that the primary ways CBCR is embodied is through 10 actions (properties with varying dimensions): (a) building community, (b) empowering, (c) engaging through relevance, (d) gentle persistence, (e) noticing, asking, and listening, (f) person-centeredness, (g) playfulness, (h) presence, (i) setting and modeling expectations and accountability, and (j) sharing about oneself. These actions, or ways of being with students, are inherent in the SSC process, influencing how it develops and manifests.

Table 2

Properties and Dimensions of the Conveying Belief, Care and Reverence Subcategory

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
Building community	Classroom	"You'll see that some kids totally take the opportunity to help a neighbor, because they're either faster at it or they're getting that concept." (T)
		When they got back to class she [teacher] said let's do a 2-minute garbage clean up please. They [students] all walked around the room and cleaned up everything on the floor as a group. (T Obs)
	Staff	"Our staff is really, really tight. . . .We just have a function every month to laugh and have fun together, which I think is really important. That's one thing that anybody who leaves here or comes here says, that there is no other school that has a tight staff like [name of school redacted], like, 'There's just something so different about that school'—which I think shows, to the kids, that we care." (T)
		"Just having a great coworker support team, too." (T)
	School	"If we're headed to the library and someone from a different passing time has dropped everything, if someone doesn't jump in and volunteer, 'Let's stop and help this person pick up their stuff.' So I think it's about building community, because when you build community, you build trust." (T)
		"It's one of our goals as a building to really have that sense of family here for everyone, so they came up with a survey to give students, and it's that survey the kids take that we then see who's connected and who's not . . . it makes me proud to be a part of this staff. So as I say, those kids that don't indicate that they really feel connected, we try to hook them up with one staff person, at least, that will check in with them and try to make sure they have some kind of a connection here. And really, that helps with attendance, and it helps with success, because then it's a place where they want to come, and it's a place where they're getting that basic need met." (NTS)
	Partnering with parents	"But I really try to make it more of like, 'What should we do?' . . . . 'These are the things that I see him or her struggling with. What are your thoughts?' Like, 'What should we do to try to fix this?' And then trying to send home emails, or phone calls, about random great stuff that happens: you know, if the kid has a really great day." (T)
		The other thing, too, is that we've been trying to be conscious of the fact that some parents don't want to come in to school. . . . it's like some of these kids that aren't having a very good experience in school, maybe their parents didn't, either. I know that sometimes there's that assumption of, well, I've emailed, I've called, I'm not hearing back from the parents, and then we think they don't care. That's not always the case; you know they're busy, or whatever they're doing. So we have to be, I think, very gentle and careful as to how we invite them in to school. And I think it needs to be an invitation. It's not like, 'We need you to come in [stern voice]'". (T)

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
	Broader community	"I have a partnership with [company name redacted] . . . .so the engineers come in and work with our kids. A science teacher and myself started a math and science night, where it's just this free night to be nerdy and get involved with math and science. We have tons of different vendors that come in . . . it's like whatever you can get kids excited. We do highway clean-up with the Student Council, so there's a lot of community-based [connection] there." (T)
		"I think just knowing the area and living here or shopping here, that's for me what culture responsive is for me. . . . Just to know knowing the community, know what they're talking about, knowing the leaders in that community: who do I need to contact or would do I need to look at. So I think connectedness is knowing the community of the kids you serve, the stakeholders." (NTS)
Empowering	Asking for and integrating student/family input	"But I think, too, getting student input, asking the kids, like having the kids fill out a survey. 'Do you feel like you belong here? Do you have at least one adult in the building that you could go to and talk to if something was wrong or if you needed to talk to somebody; and/or if you don't feel that way, what can we do, or how could things be different so that you would feel that way? '" (T)
		Participant started class by saying "so I've been thinking" and she told kids that she discussed seating with other teachers. She proposed one idea of open seating 3 days a week and assigned seating for the 2 work days. She asked students what they thought. They all thought a moment and said ok. She said she thought it was a good compromise. They all agreed. (T Obs.)
	Encouraging and celebrating students	"My advanced class, they do a meet every month for continental math. You can't use a calculator. It's just that gifted thinking, where you come at it sideways. I'm horrible at it, like I just don't think that way. But for them, it's another way for them to express themselves . . . .We just finished a project in algebra and it was very artsy, where they had to draw a picture and then they wrote the equations for line, but you got to see their expression come out." (T)
		Praises students [playing a group game] for small things (e.g. organizing cards, explaining something, etc.). (NTS Obs.)
	Explaining the "why"	"If they see us as caring, they're going to want to work harder, whatever. Cause if they're not . . . , some of the kids will just do it for themselves, but a lot of kids, they need some 'why? Why should we do it?'" (T)
		Going through some definitions and they walk through them together. One student says "why do we have to do this?" they talk about the why. (T Obs.)
	Lessening the power differential	"So I think we just need to accept them for being, in my case, 11- and 12-year-olds, and let them know that I'm a human being, too. I still have to be an adult. There's no doubt that I have to be the adult in the classroom. But they need to know that I'm a human being, and that I care about them, and that I'll share with them, and that they can feel comfortable sharing with me." (T)

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
		"I talk to them more like one of them; or at least a little bit more casual tone leads to them feeling a little bit more connected, rather than, like I'm talking with them and not at them, that kind of thing." (T)
	Providing opportunity	"For my middle school AVID kids, we do a lot of college stuff. . . . how to apply for student loans, or how to look for scholarships, or even where to get the application for college." (T)
		"So just to get them involved and whatever and try new things," (T)
	Creating space for mistake-making	"I try to remember that they're kids, and they're not going to get everything the first time, they're going to make mistakes, they're going to get in trouble. And remember that they're just kids, and don't get too fired up." (T)
		Shows them how to tri-fold their paper and says "it's ok if you are like me and do it wrong the first time." (T Obs.)
Engaging through relevance	Integrating culture, events, history, etc. into the curriculum	"There are some teachers – like, I'm a math teacher, but you [any teacher] still should be able to talk about race or culture . . . 'Race doesn't have anything to do with math.' Well, yes it does. Where did math come from?'. . . And that's what I'm trying to do: make it culturally responsive, and that's how you build relationships. You don't know everything, but do your research, so it's like, how can I make this culturally responsive? You know what I mean. So connecting to culture, race, and things like that plays a big deal when we have this achievement gap that kids disconnect because they don't have a relationship to what they're learning. 'How does this relate to me? Is this real? Is it relevant to me? What's the relationship of it to me?'" (NTS)
		"Just anything to get them involved, like the Super Bowl's this weekend and we're going to do a math pick." (T)
	Promoting developmental, social-emotional and life skills	"So, these project-based learning, these give them the twenty first century skills of how to work in a team, how to be creative, how to work through problems, communicate with one another and listen with empathy, which is really hard for everyone to do but especially for teenagers. So that's kind of is why I have incorporated human-centered design." (T)
		"That's a lesson I tell kids all the time. There's always: 'I can't stand that teacher. I don't want to go in there. That teacher's mean to me.' And it's, 'There are going to be people in your life, whether it's in your family, in your professional world, in your personal life, in your whatever, everyday life, that you don't get along with very well, but the reality is that you're going to have to learn how to be at least civil and be cordial.' I always use the story of, if you're at work, and your co-worker is somebody that you just cannot stand, you can't just flip them off. You're going to get fired." (T)
Gentle persistence ("trying")		"There are some where persistence, maybe, is also a part of it. Especially the kids I had in 7th grade who I have again this year, some of them know you can try to blow Ms. [name redacted] off, but she is going to keep coming after you until you do whatever it is she wanted you to do, so just give in [laughs]. Not in a bad way, but I get it that you are satisfied with that F, or I get it that you don't want to do this activity, but I'm going to come back to you every five

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
		minutes until it happens, or I'm going to sit with you here after school until it gets done, or whatever." (T)
		"It's, 'How's it going?! How was your weekend? What'd you do?' [using an excited voice]. Because the more you ask those little questions, they may not answer for a while, but someday they're going to say, 'Oh, I did such-and-such with my brother.' Bang. Now I know he has a brother, and now I know he likes to do that, so the next time I can say, 'Hey, did you go fishing again? What'd you catch?' Then they can tell me. Because they're not going to answer you the first time. Some of them will, because that's just the way they're built, and some won't. But keep asking. . . .Ask. And don't expect, and don't push. Don't expect, and don't push. I don't think we can expect an answer every time." (NTS)
Noticing, asking and listening	Acknowledging (with a greeting or goodbye)	"Just getting in the door with the students first, and then you can teach them the curriculum that you're there to teach. But first you have to get in the door. So greeting them every day, or hopefully most every day, then the kids will say, 'Oh, they do know me.'" (NTS)
		"So the big push right now is to be in the hallway during passing time, just stand at the door and greet the students by name, look at them. There's a touch component, like acknowledging each student, which some teachers do, some teachers don't; it just depends on their comfort level. Some teachers will stand at their door and give high-fives to the students as they enter or just try to acknowledge them and build relationships that way." (NTS)
	Knowing names	"Name, eye contact, making that connection to the heart" (NTS)
		"And getting to know them, trying really hard, right away, to learn their names. That can be tough when you have 130 kids. I feel like the sooner I can put faces to names and names to faces and let them know that I really do care, that I'm a human being and that I really do care." (T)
	Inquiring (about students' interests)	"Finding those pieces that a kid is passionate about, and weaving the rest of what you're doing around whatever that is, you're going to raise that level of engagement." (NTS)
		"Ask the kids their interests. I think that's a big thing. Say, 'What do you like to do?' and I remember that." (NTS)
	Noticing	"And I try to always emphasize it the day after [attending a student event], like, 'You know, I went to the band concert last night. I really enjoyed this song.' So they knew, like, not only was I . . . I always make it a point to say, 'Oh, I really liked this part of this song,' or, 'This seems really, really difficult,' so they know it's beyond me just being there; I'm there, and I'm listening, and having that type of connection, versus just I'm there." (T)
		Commented to one student, quietly, that she saw her painting on the wall and said she liked it. (T Obs.)
	Listening	"Show them how you care, show them you're going to listen." (NTS)
		"I think the other piece is we need to be able to listen, too. And all of that takes time, which is the hard part." (T)
Person-centeredness		"Even though we push the testing and all this and that as far as academics, I probably am student-first—not that teachers aren't—but student-first and then my subject second." (T)

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
		"Definitely student-centered, just teachers talking about students during their team planning time." (NTS)
Playfulness (fun)		"We do try to have fun in here. They probably think I'm totally crazy, but I think if you asked any of my kids, they'd say I'm passionate or I love math. I try to make things fun." (T)
		"I try to build relationships pretty much from the very beginning of the school year, obviously: find out about them, what's interesting to them; make learning fun for them; talk to them about life outside of school." (T)
Presence	"Be visible" (106, OS), available, and approachable	"I think the more approachable you can make yourself, the more accountable you can hold the kids, if that makes sense. And so a lot of times, and for a very traditional teacher, it comes off as 'what in the world is she [the participant] doing and why is she doing that', and I can give you examples of it, but I really open the door to connecting with as many kids that are kind of lost souls, or the ones that are making the ruckus out in the hallway, or whatever. I try to do that as much as possible, regardless of whether or not they're on my special caseload, because so often the students that I work with are connecting in with the kids that are at risk, because they have a lot in common. And so if I can, for lack of a better word, infiltrate that world, and be their person, or an additional person in all of their lives, there's a lot of positive power that comes out of that." (T)
		Constantly circulating and being available to students. Encourages and also give some space. (T Obs.)
	Nearness (physical proximity and/or contact)	"When the kids enter his room he fist bumps them or shakes their hand. You're just getting that physical connection. . . .Yeah, it takes forever for his kids to get in the room, but he does it. Fist bump is the easy one, especially for the germy nature of children. I'll recommend the fist bump overall." (T)
		Walked around and worked with groups to guide them. Sits or leans down next to them. Makes some suggestions. Facilitates consensus building. (T Obs.)
Setting and modeling expectations and accountability	Charting the course (setting expectations and boundaries)	"I wanted to focus in on four things: respecting yourself, respecting others, respecting property, and respecting learning. We put that out to kids in all their advisories, and they have the discussion of what does this look like, what does it mean. Then we had a breakdown of, okay, here's what it means to respect others, here's what it means to respect yourself, respect property, and respect learning. It just helped give students a chance to have input on: 'What are our expectations? What do you think we should expect from you, and what would it look like?'. . . . So I compiled it, then I worked with a small team to say, 'Okay, what's similar on these?' and get it down to just a few bullet points. Then we did that in our advisories, and every kid signed it." (NTS)
		"I think just being reliable in terms of they know what they can expect when they get here and how things work." (T)
	Classroom or group/space management	"The classroom management piece. And for me I've always gone overly strict, especially early on, and then that allows us to have some fun afterwards if, 'Hey, you're here on time, you have your materials,' things like that. And just finding ways to make them realize that there are expectations: 'This is what has to happen in order for everybody

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
		to get what they need to get out of here. You can't be interrupting, you can't be showing up late, or you can't be doing this.' It's always a tough balance early in the year, and I come into the year ready for that, because I come in with very hard expectations right away; but then I also will be joking around with them." (T)
		"Well, they know that I'm kind but strict; there are rules: you can't be coming in talking, you're not going to be walking around the office, and stuff like that. So they're supposed to come in and be prepared to do some work." (NTS)
	Modeling	"I've got these two [respectful language] posters, and as the year goes on…I will call kids out at the beginning of the year [for using disrespectful terms], and then they start calling each other out. They're like you can't say that word in here, and they're like that's so "absurd", and I'm like, see, that's fine. . . . Maybe a couple of times a year I'll have to give the bigger speech about why not . . . You know Race is way trickier. I'm much less comfortable with race, just because I'm a white lady from the suburbs. Actually, I live in the city. But still calling kids out when they make racist statements, and then more and more of them start to police each other, which is good. I think that's really necessary and I think that because they're hearing so much from outside, that it [helps]. But I've never gotten flak from a parent. I've never even had a kid who really has said anything. . . . But yeah, if anything, it just means that some of them start to police each other, or to stop each other, or to maybe stop themselves and think oh wait, how could I say this differently, or how could I treat this person differently, or whatever." (T)
		"The more that we can model as adults with relationships, then the adults see us, and hopefully it trickles down to the kids." (NTS)
	Second chances/ fresh starts	"We start fresh. What we do in the health office, though, is we also have the conversation [about expectations, accountability and consequences]" (NTS).
		"I think really letting kids know this is a fresh start, right here, right now." (T)
Sharing about oneself	Being mindful of relevance (no "over sharing")	"That's all connections with parents, families, which I enjoy just as much as the connection with the students. But I think most of it's the same thing. It's the same thing. It's the same being real, sharing enough of yourself, but only when it's necessary (laughs) and what they need to hear." (NTS)
		"And I share some of my faults, like English was really hard for me, and I had to work especially hard to get the grades that I wanted to, where math came super, super easy -- so if I can find a way to make it easy for them, and all that I ask is that they try." (T)
	Consider personal comfort-level	"I open myself up very much to them. I do have a private life outside of school, but much of my personality and my interests I share, so they know about me. I open up and I share what I like to do, what I hate to do." (T)
		"I don't think I'm someone who shares. I mean I share about my family, but I think, I remember teachers who you

Properties and Dimensions		Representative Quotes/Observational Data
		knew so much more about their personal life. I don’t do that, as much. I think I’m more, I kind of want to know what’s going on with them.” (T)
	Sharing through artifacts (e.g. photos, posters, etc.)	“It is that fine line between you’re personal and you’re professional. I very rarely tell them anything about me. . . . Every once in a while, it’ll be the superficial stuff, like, ‘Oh, I love that movie,’ or, ‘Yeah, I’ve got a wife and kids.’ I have my kids’ pictures up. There are some people that don’t believe you should have pictures of your children up, but I totally do, because I want them to see the human side of me. Especially when I’ve got parents in here. . . “ (NTS)
		“And you can see [indicates] like this is all just something my daughter made me over here. These are all awards I got when I was their age that we use to just make that connection. . . . It's just completely open. I like the [sports team name redacted], so here's all my [sports team] stuff, and there are some stories with some of the things that are on there, where I got them and that kind of thing. I get little knick-knacky weird gifts from kids, so I display them all over here, and they're fascinated with that.” (T)

Note. NTS = non-teaching staff person and T = teacher.

The student-staff connection (SSC) process. In this study, the SSC process develops through 5 inter-looping phases (see Figure 1); (1) intention and hope, (2) initial encounter, (3) circling back, (4) expanding, and (5) impact. Each staff person, characterized by how they convey belief, care, and reverence towards students, uniquely enacts the SSC process. Each SSC phase has nuanced variations and are all experienced through the individual perspective of the staff person and the student. In short, "it is expected that you build relationships with your students. I think it's unacceptable to say that all those would look the same. That's just not humanly possible" (T). Thus, as the SSC process, and its variations are described, the reader is encouraged to keep in mind the aforementioned CBCR actions that staff put into practice as they endeavor to connect.

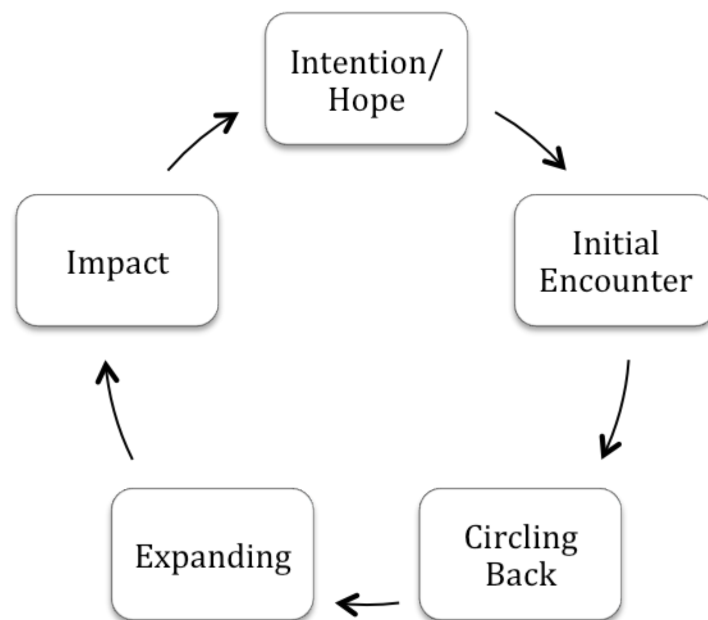

Figure 1. Student-Staff Connection Process

Process variations. The SSC process is expressed in this model as five distinct phases for clarity, but they are often overlapping, looping and cyclical. A discussion of how participants understand the process as a whole, and its variation, offers critical context for the specific phases

discussed later in the discussion section. The SSC process may (a) vary by form and flow, (b) differ in timing, and (c) is unique to each student and staff person.

Some participants describe the process of connecting as being "linear" (T), "a continuum" (NTS), "a progression" (T), or having a "bump in the road" (T). Many had difficulty describing it: "for me it's not prescribed. I don't have a check-off list of . . . it's not prescribed in my head" (T), "no specific guidelines I follow or anything like that. It just comes naturally" (NTS), or

> "This is hard. I mean I think the whole reason that you can't do a quantitative assessment of *how* [emphasis added] people connect with students is just because it really is, at least for me [waving arms around], a very sort of nebulous . . I don't feel like I have a formal where its I do this, then I do this, then I do this." (T)

The process also varies by timing, either moving quickly or slowly, and the recognition of a connection may be seen right away, eventually after students return months or years later, or may remain unknown (e.g. "a lot of times you don't even realize the connection you could make or you are making" [T]). Another participant describes the process metaphorically:

> It's kind of like a . . . . It's a race. With some kids, it's a spring sprint; with other kids, it's a marathon. And I've learned that, with 8th grade, you don't always know what you've done or the impact maybe that you've had until if they do come back. You just hope. Because sometimes we don't see it here. (T).

The timing and approach may also be influenced by developmental stage, "eighth grade, there are still a lot of relational kids, but they ease into it a little slower" (T). As another describes "I think it has to be individual for each student. You can't just have a one size fits all plan" (T). SSC is different for every student and staff member as these two describe: "I think it would be very different for every kid" (T), and "I don't think it would be the same. I think it would be different for each child, because it depends on the kid and how they respond to you, to life, to the

environment, (NTS). Yet another reiterates the same sentiment, "in education it's so unscripted and informal. I'm struggling here. . . because it's many steps that you can take, and they'd be different for every person" (NTS). Not only is the connection process different for every student, but "kids need different levels" (T) of connection.

> I think with some students, they're telling you their life story, but there's also a lot who may not be connected on that sort of intimate level, but they know that you care, and they know that you are a person there who, if they wanted to do that, would be there for them, that you care about who they are as a person and not just a number in the classroom. (T)

Building connections with students, may take time and effort, multiple attempts and approaches at the practice level, as well as intrapersonal reflection and reframing on the part of the staff person. All of the actions, the practical and the less tangible, create space of hope for potential connection, which for some participants, come naturally:

> You just, you have to somehow get in. And sometimes you can't with all kids, but as soon as they know that you care this much [gestures small amount with fingers], they're going to open up. It's just years and years of being with middle school kids, that's just how it is. It's a natural evolution. (NTS)

Phase 1: Intention and hope. Intention and hope refers to what participants want students to experience (i.e. perceive being cared for), as well as using their own wisdom and ability to understand students to provide them based on their assessment (e.g. noticing, asking, etc.) of what the student needs. During interactions of the SSC process, with input from the student, that may change over time. In addition to an underlying connection-oriented intentionality of conveying care, belief and reverence to students, the SSC process includes specific stepping-stone-like intentions like getting to know the student or empowering the students, among others, that are antecedent to the relational artistry action-concepts discussed

earlier. As one participant states "For me, it's [connecting with students] very intentional early in the year" (T). In the same vein of connecting, many participants specifically mentioned a hope that the students would gain social-emotional learning (SEL) type skills, such as working in groups, self-regulation, problem solving, critical thinking: "teaching them how to be respectful to themselves and their peers and take the courage to stand up to people that aren't doing the right thing" (T), and "'it's not okay to laugh at other people, because none of us is perfect, including me,' so just tying in some of those pieces of making them understand that we are a community" (T). At the same time participants are *seeing within, beyond and betwee*n, which seems to remove some of the judgment that sometimes accompanies developmentally typical behaviors (e.g. "middle schoolers really struggle with empathy" [T]).

Phase 2: Initial encounter. The initial encounter refers to the first time there is an interaction or encounter with students. Though this may be at the beginning of a new school year, many participants mentioned encountering students in the community setting, or knowing students through a sibling that was formerly in their class or an extracurricular activity they facilitated. Some described students having heard of the staff person from former students with a specific reputation preceding them. Moreover, the first encounter with a student may be an initial interaction, or it may have been preceded by a student or teachers "knowing" about one another before the first in-person interaction. First interactions are generally, but not always, initiated by the staff person and can be in any place or time during or after the school day. These participants share their intentional first encounter approaches and link connection with learning.

> If the kids are feeling safe and connected emotionally, they're going to learn. It could be greeting them at the door, or it could be making sure that I connect with them elsewhere, whether it's in the lunchroom or in the hallway, just letting them know that I know they're there. (T)

> Finding *something* [emphasis] that the kid's interested in. There's always something. I've connected with kids with guitars, I've connected with videogames, I've connected talking about ham radios, knitting -- so finding something that a kid's interested in to get some commonality between you. It might be something they're interested in and I have no clue about, like Pokémon cards. I had a kid telling me all about those. So if they have some kind of connectedness with you, it makes a whole world of difference, because then it's not just a teacher or just an assistant principal or anything like that; it's somebody that they feel cares about them. I think that's the base of what you really need. (NTS)

This phase may also be a time when assessing and reassessing components of the process is initiated, as described here:

> It's kind of an observation period, where you're: what are they like? And you can do that in 4 seconds, or you can do it in half an hour, or you can do it in two weeks. It depends on the kid, depends on the situation. But you're assessing how do they function? What are they like? (NTS)

Phase 3: Circling-back. *Circling back* refers to staff following-up with students (e.g. "so then I'm listening and remembering, and then checking in" [T]). The follow-up may be related to something academic, but often is more relational. Circling back can be seen as staying student-centered and seeing students holistically. The following quote describes circling back, similar to how staff engage in g*entle persistence*, in the context of gaining trust.

> And I think I've seen that with at-risk youth, I think I've seen that, a lot of times, you start making that connection, and they've been burned so many times -- it could be that they've had a connection and people move out of their lives, or leave, or they've been on that, kind of losing end -- that they don't want to be

> there, so as soon as you start feeling that connection, a lot of times they'll do something to try to sever that tie and push you away so that they're in control of pushing you away, and not them being pushed away. So you know, and a lot of times, it's hard to break through that wall that they have up, to the point where they know: 'This guy's not going away. He's not going to give up me.' And then, okay, fine, I can have some of that trust. (NTS)

Phase 4: Expanding. Expanding is a broadening or deepening of the connection between staff and student. This may occur intuitively, but may also be a strategic way to enhance that space within which a student may become more engaged in the connection, or at least have a stronger perception that the there is an opportunity for connection if and when they need/want it. Many participants explained that even if there is a connection, the interactions cannot only be focused on the behavior or academics or underlying issues because students will get “exhausted, so you need to return to them as being the expert” (NTS), thus circling back and expanding the connection with the student as a person. Importantly, not all connections go through this phase because sometimes SSC may be a more momentary micro-connection, vicarious or collective connection that remains constant. Despite the idea of a relationship or deepening connection between students and staff, numerous participants described situations that were brief encounters or momentary interactions with students that followed the same SSC process patterns as *micro-connections*, or sometimes disconnections. Students may expand a connection with a particular staff person, and still feel connected with others while not necessarily expanding.

Phase 5: Impact. Any connection-related outcomes, both challenging and positive, are a part of this phase. Participants’ perceived impacts of connecting, such as increased academic engagement and progress, improvements in classroom management/response, a student’s increased willingness to share personal information or concerns, willingness to try out new or unfamiliar activities or ideas, an increase in *reciprocal reverence* between the staff person and the

student, and even something as simple as a student showing up to school or class and being less disruptive, even if they were not engaging in school work. Some impacts are subtle, or unknown, and others are easily recognized:

> I think the really easy, obvious one is when they start to volunteer things to you. Not like super-secret things, but the ones who say hi back, or then they start to say hi on their own, or they want to tell me what they did over the weekend without me prompting them. Sometimes it's as simple as they laughed at my joke. (T)

Another participant explains, "I think you know you're making connections when kids are coming in to see you. I have a couple of girls that are in 8th grade that stop in every night" (T). Many mentioned not knowing the impact until a student gave a note of gratitude, returned to visit after leaving the school, or even inviting a particular staff member to their graduation. Thus, the impact may be obvious or go unnoticed, often happens across a continuum, is different for all students, and may change depending on staff assessing and reassessing over time.

Assessing and reassessing. Similar to the nursing process, staff are constantly assessing and reassessing the SSC process, student input and responses as well as their own integrated Creating Space process. It is critical to know when to circle back, give a fresh start, change an approach, etc. because "as a teacher, as a staff member, as an adult, your intention could be one thing; impact could be completely different . . . We all can intend things, but how it impacts that person is what's most important, and their feelings are real" (NTS).

Table 3

Phases of SSC

Phase	Select representative quotes and memos
Phase 1: Intention/Hope	"My goal is, coming to school they feel like: 'At least one person knows my name, knows who I am, knows some of my story and is there to support me, and I know that even when I mess up, they're not going to back away from me, and they're not going to give up on me.'" (NTS) "Letting them know you care, number one. They're going to pick that up when you start asking about them." (NTS)
Phase 2: Initial Encounter	"Just listening to the kid, and finding out who they are and kind of what they like to do, and getting them comfortable talking about things that maybe have nothing to do with school." (NTS) "I think it's just the idea of making the effort to know their name early on, and then kind of ease into asking... It seems easier to make connections when it's not the whole group. It's a little more awkward that way, so taking the time as there are just a few kids in class, as they're coming in or leaving, talking to them, or when they have work time, stopping by and commenting. So I think it really is a progression. It's the little things early in the year that build to realizing which kids maybe are standing out as someone that you should talk to more often because they seem a little bit lonelier, or they don't have other kids that just voluntarily want to be their partner, some of that stuff." (T)
Phase 3: Circling Back	"So one kid would say, 'Oh, Mr. [name redacted] is real,' and saying, 'Oh, he's willing to listen.' One other student was like, 'He'll talk to me when I'm not in trouble, as well.' So I think that's one thing, is like, 'Oh, I'm going to check in with you no matter what. . . . I'm going to try to have that on my calendar to check in with you.' Just be proactive." (NTS) One student walks by and he [participant] asks how he is and he ignores him. He [participant] tells me that is unusual for that student and that is a kid he will check in with today. (NTS Obs.)
Phase 4: Expanding	"I wait for somebody I know who is just starting to give me back a little bit more and then that kid just becomes special to me. I seek that kid out and I go, 'hey, how is your mom?' 'Did your hockey meet go well?'" (T)

Phase	Select representative quotes and memos
	“Say, 'What do you like to do?' and I remember that. For some of my kids, I go to their basketball games. . . . So build relationships that way, getting to know what they like, interests. Slowly, when I build interests with kids, when I get to know them, I buy books for them, so when they do come down here [to the participant’s office], if they're in trouble or something like that, I have something they can connect with, maybe, we reflect on, talk about, things like that.” (NTS).
Phase 5: Impact	“When you start with these kids and they don’t trust you, they’re short, they’re sullen, and as they learn to trust you, they start to joke, and they become happy, and they laugh. Or they’ll only give you a smile where they won’t give other kids a smile, or they’ll peek out at you to make sure you’re in the room, whether they’re communicating or not, because they hide behind their hair at this age.” (NTS). “With former students I know there's a connectedness, because I have 7th- and 8th-graders that come back.” (T)
Assessing and reassessing	“What I've tried to work on, and I know other teachers have, is you have a certain student acting a certain way, you know, and some teachers very easily could take it personally. And yet, if you take a step back, and you're mindful of this situation, you could say, 'Okay, I have no idea why this that student is acting the way they are. I'm not going to take it personally.' Maybe I'll step back, and come back -- or whatever it may be. But just having, just being mindful allows you to know what the next step is, like how you are going to approach the situation.” (T) “So that's then the reevaluation part of it. Right? Okay, so now we have the connection, how is it working? Is it working good for them? Is it giving them what they need? Is it positive for them? Is it giving them better outcomes? Because if it's not, it's not good. It may be a great relationship, but it's not good for them if they're not improving their academics, because that's what we're all here for.” (NTS)

Note: NTS = Non-teaching staff, T = Teacher, and Obs = Observational data

Role Uniquenesses

Though many staff in this study are primarily teachers, or former teachers if in administrative roles, there are differences in professional background and training, and the ability some staff have, due to role and time, to have more one-on-one relationships with students, regardless of role, the connection process essentially the same. Importantly, this study reveals that roles should not be seen through a limited or preconceived lens. For example, the perception that teachers and administrators must focus solely on academics, leaving the connecting to other support staff, the notion that support staff with less consistent interaction with students (e.g. lunchroom or administrative assistant staff members) do not connect with students, or as one nurse described "I think the persona is out there that school nurses just put on Band-aids and take temperatures, and it's so much bigger than that" (NTS), limit the potential for student-staff connection and the cultivation school climate and community. As this participant describes, reflecting on her approach with students:

> Mainly relationship-building, making the connection no matter what they enjoy or like, or trying to get to know the kids and then making that connection; because if you have the relationship, whether it was teaching or an administrative role, they're going to respond. (NTS)

In this way, seeing within, beyond and between is not only a way to see and understand students, but also the adults in the school setting. What was similar between nursing and teaching, as well as the other professional roles, is the creative and sometimes in-the-moment problem solving, assessing and reassessing with a connection in mind, that staff engaged in by pulling from awareness, their shared humanness (with each other and the students), shifting/balancing, and the artistry of it. Teaching and nursing, in particular, are similar in many ways with a focus on education or health, but both (and all school staff) are essentially moving towards the healthy development and wellbeing of students by being student/patient/client-centered.

Process-Influencing Factors

An ecological model guided the categorization of participant reported, connection process influencing factors. Numerous factors were noted as being opposing (or dual) facilitators and barriers by opposition. Some factors were described as either a challenge or a support. The factors were coded as being situated in one or more of the ecological levels: intrapersonal (student or staff), interpersonal (staff-student/family), school and school district, community, and macro-level (socio-political environment), as well as chronosystem influences (e.g. a political election year, circumstances occurring during certain holidays or school breaks, etc.).

Table 4

Influencing Factors

Factor Level	Factors
Chronosystem	Time of year (e.g. Valentine's week, spring break, pre-summer)[c] Developmental stage
Macro Level	Socio-political environment (Contentious US election season 2016)[c] National mental health and substance use crisis[c]
Community	Partnering[s]
School and district	Advisory class[c,s] Class size[c,s] Culture and climate[c,s] • Assumption that relationships with students is a cure-all[c] • Leadership encouraging relationships/connectedness[s] • School community and skill building programs (AVID, PBIS, WEB)[s] • Teaming[s] (Interdisciplinary and in the classroom) Resources/finances[c,s] Time and scheduling[c,s] Attendance[c,s] Cultural liaison (district professional role supporting students/families)[s] District and community resources[s] Middle school model[s] Need for more school individualization (e.g. unique needs, community situatedness)[c] Need for more advocacy for underserved students and families[c]

Factor Level	Factors
	Training/continuing education[c,s]
	Unsure of students' perceptions of connection/connectedness (e.g. interpersonally and through measures/surveys)
Interpersonal (between staff and student or family)	Acknowledging students[c,s]
	Negative first interaction with school/staff (for students or parents)[c]
	Partnering with families (or not)[c,s]
	Gender same/different between student and staff member[c,s]
	Curricular relevance[c,s]
	Extracurricular involvement (students and staff members)[s]
	Ability to gain/build trust (or not)[c,s]
	Teaching students about themselves (e.g. healthy development, SEL)[s]
	Trying/persistence[s]
	Challenging family/home/life circumstances[c]
	Navigating cultural and socio-political conversations[c,s]
Intrapersonal (Staff Person)	Age[c,s]
	Developmental awareness/training[c,s]
	Abstaining from or engaging in judgment/preconceptions[c,s]
	Knowing/not knowing local resources[c,s]
	Being self-aware and reflective (or not)[c,s]
	Personal barriers[c]
	Sharing about self (mindful of relevance, not "over sharing)[c,s]
	Disposition[c,s] (e.g. having "it" or not[c,s]; "just a job" mentality[c]; passion[s],
	Philosophy (i.e. relationship-first[s] vs. traditional/fundamental[c])
	Mental health and wellbeing/stress[c,s]
	Ability and willingness (or not) to shift/reframe[c,s]
	Anticipate and being proactive[s]
	Professional and personal experience[c,s]
Intrapersonal (Student)	Mental health concerns[c]
	Student demeanor[c,s] (e.g., shy/outgoing, motivated/not motivated, etc.)

Note. Factors are labeled with c, s, or cs, representing a challenge, support, or both, respectively.

A few participants discussed the use of connectedness measure or surveys at their school site, however, had concerns about how students were interpreting the questions. As one participant described:

> I think part of what we realized, too, is that how kids define a connection and how adults define connections are two totally different things, and that's the piece

> in our school we haven't been able to figure out, like: how do we explain what we mean to them so that, when they're filling out a survey, or we're asking them, 'Do you feel like you have an adult?' they're not thinking it has to be this, like, 'My world is ending. What adult would I talk to?' It's more or less: is there someone that's just friendly and says hello and asks you questions about your personal life. (T)

Another specific message described in the following quote, indicates the interplay between contextual factors, an obligatory mindset towards relationship building in schools, in this case administrative or district pressure on teachers to connect with students in order to achieve better academic or behavioral outcomes, and assumptions versus the reality of how those factors can or cannot influence SSC:

> I think one thing that gets frustrating is that when we try to talk about behaviors it's constantly, it's almost like a scapegoat like 'oh well you need to build a relationship with them.' It's like 'oh duh.' I teach middle school, if I don't know that I we have a problem. However, there are barriers like we're talking about. There are kids you can't. There are things that are against your power for building relationships. (T)

Additionally, participants explained that an expectation that each staff member will be able to or should connect with *every* student they encounter is not only impractical, but unnecessary. At the same time there was a message of not being discouraged; this participant reframes connecting with hopefulness recognizing it as an opportunity "Yeah (pause). I think . . . Well, I'm an optimist, so I think there's . . . are some kids where it's more challenging, but yet I think there's a connection somewhere" (T). Notably, as illustrated by the previous quote, a few participants did not frame factors as barriers, instead described them as opportunities. This is an example of how some participants are able to engage in the more abstract and intrapersonal Creating Space

processes in order to reimagine their approach to cultivating connections. Lastly, two ancillary influential factors, professional development training and connectedness-related documents/artifacts that surfaced throughout the study, are situated across ecological levels and warrant further discussion.

Training. A specific question about relationship or connectedness-related training experiences was included at the end of the guided interview as a way to gain information around professional trainings as a connection-process influencing factor. Most participants stated that there were no specific "connectedness" trainings, throughout the interviews referenced numerous trainings that they interpreted as being relational in nature, "we're realizing that the more connectedness you have with the kids, the easier I think it is . . . . Connectedness is just a huge thing right now" (T). Participants described some trainings that were district wide (e.g. culturally responsive classrooms), school-centered (e.g. various SEL trainings, AVID, PBIS), and other "workshops" they attended individually or through their role-based professional development trainings (e.g. SEL, developmental and "brain training" (T), Where Students Belong (WEB), mindfulness and growth mindset, trauma and/or crisis prevention training, motivational interviewing, racial equity, mental health, and yoga, among others). Participants also mentioned reading and learning about similar topics for their own personal interest, using TedTalks or Pinterest to explore ideas, tapping into their own parenting or prior personal and professional experiences, sharing in formal and informal staff work groups, as well as through their role-based professional learning communities (PLCs). Many suggested the need for more training around topics such as mental health, adolescent development, and trauma-informed care. Multiple participants, primarily in school A, and one participant in school B, specifically mentioned needing to know how to engage with students with questions related to, or responding to inappropriate comments made, about racial, ethnic or cultural differences. They noted that the contentious U.S. election season and accompanying volatile socio-political environment, during

which this study was conducted, played a role in how students and staff engaged with one another. One of the schools responded to staff members' concerns immediately by bringing in an academician with expertise in race relations and race perception from a local university to host a discussion-style staff training.

Documents. A specific question regarding documents, or policies related to connectedness was also included in the interview so as to explore their role in the student-staff connection process, if any. Documents and policies did not surface as overtly influential or as central as might be expected, instead, they were a small component of how participants related to, and Create Space for, connecting with students. Only a few participants referred me to a document, policy, school messaging or posters, a school handbook, training documents or classroom management documents they used to aid in connecting. Many participants did not reference documents, and as one succinctly described, "I mean, not like it should be. How's that?" (NTS), expressing a lack of existing/available connectedness-oriented or explicitly supportive documents and policies. Although there was limited evidence of staff knowing about and/or using documents and policies as a guide and support in their connection process, through observation I noted connectedness-supporting artifacts and messaging around communal school spaces, in offices and classrooms, and on the schools' websites. The district and school-specific websites, and accompanying short videos telling the community about their school all had elements of connectedness and relationships interwoven. There may be a disconnect between what is in writing and what happens in practice, or participants may not be aware of the link between the two. With that said, there are definite, what I would call "movements" towards connecting with messaging in the hallways and classrooms, through the websites, and in the language that is used throughout the school. In summary, documents, policies, physically visible messaging through the school setting, and other media-type communications are the *intention*

behind cultivating connections. Whether or not they are consciously recognized or utilized by participants is a place for future exploration.

Discussion

This study was aimed at discovering the process staff go through to connect with early adolescent-age students in middle school settings, as well as identifying the related process-influencing factors. Study data revealed the SSC process, situated in the more expansive Creating Space process, as being dynamic, looping or cyclical, and generally occurring in five phases while being influenced by myriad contributing factors at multiple ecological levels. The frequency, setting, timing, purpose, depth of connection may be different for all, but the intention (e.g. making students feel valued, safe, believed in, respected, etc.) and the general process seems to be the same regardless of professional role. The specific techniques they use are unique to each individual person, but essentially they hope to know/see the student as a person. They also recognized their strengths, accept and see beyond their imperfections, mistakes, behaviors, and whatever challenging life circumstances they have. They see beyond those things while simultaneously seeing within the student (what they bring to the world as an individual) *and* see the interconnectedness of the student, family, school, socio-political culture, adolescent development, etc. These aforementioned findings are consistent with various strategies and recommendations on how to promote school connectedness by way of social connections and through developmental relationships, but also add nuances not found in broad recommendations and provide insight into the intrapersonal-interpersonal-ecological links involved in connecting with students. The three key messages from these findings are as follows, with parallel strategies described in the implication section:

- Connections between students and caring adults at school cannot be forced, rather staff members create space wherein any number of connection-catalysts may be recognized and accepted by a student, knowingly or unknowingly, resulting in some level of

connection, and for some the potential to blossom into a developmental relationship (Search Institute, 2018b).

- Student-staff connections, as understood and enacted from staffs' perspectives, develops through 5 inter-looping phases; connections between any and all caring adults and students at school, whether recognizable to the staff person or not, are an outcome in and of themselves.
- SSC is inextricably linked to, situated in and influenced by process-influencing factors across ecological levels. Of particular importance is the intrapersonal space (i.e. wellbeing and wisdom) of each staff member, including their ability to see, within (i.e. wisdom in oneself and students), beyond (i.e. seeing students as a person not their grades, behaviors, circumstances or conditions/somatic complaints) and between (i.e. recognizing interconnectedness within and across social interactions and ecological factors), and then to translate their expanding awareness into their interactions with students, is fundamental to cultivating connections (See *Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space*).

In summary, the SSC process is just as much about the students as it is the individual staff members evolving in their own time and way, and as is said colloquially in health-sectors, we must tend to "the health of the helper/healer", in this case the health and wellbeing of the educational team. Connections must be imbued with intentionality, which may come with reframing; authenticity, having space, time, resources and support to implement learning and training in authentic ways; and, with responsive attentiveness, aided by an expanding awareness at the intrapersonal level through which staffs' intentions and actions are rooted in compassion. It is inequitable/unreasonable to judge/evaluate or push staff to act in ways that are not genuine, but if there is an expectation that they are genuine that they do their "best", whatever that is, to serve students *and* there is an expectation that they evolve not only in their academic teaching skills but

also in their own SEL and managing their own wellbeing, so they can be present and tap that inner wisdom without it being clouded by other things. This would assist them in recognizing the fog/clouds that kids may surround them at times of stress and struggle, but they (staff) can always see through (recognizing strengths/resilience) to the luminous strengths within and unique personhood of each student. If staff are not able to evolve in their view of students and the value of connection-building they may be "stuck" at the same level of practice, thus unable to translate this theoretical understanding into practice. Ultimately, such reframing and subsequent praxis-level ramifications, though simple by description, would require a shift in how staff are educated, supported, and evaluated, which is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a simple shift in perspective by reflecting on their practices and what lies behind their practices offers a way to self-asses and reframe. Relatedly, a correlational study authored by Harding et al. (2019) found both better teacher wellbeing and teacher-student relationships to be associated with higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of psychosocial distress in students, and summarize literature that points towards teachers benefiting from positive teacher-student relationships, concluding that "improving the teacher-student relationship may have a positive impact on both student and teacher wellbeing (p. 185). Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) also discusses the potential value of assessing the relationship between students and teachers and teachers' wellbeing.

Despite the challenging times and financial constraints, there is a need for space for (exploratory), individualization encouraged for both students and staff are to embrace this opportunity to evolve in their connection-building skills and thrive both professionally and personally. Those interpersonal and intrapersonal pieces are critical to staff being able to perform their best and to genuinely connect with the students they encounter. There are likely a number of excellent training available to address each of the Creating Space model processes, as well as the influencing factors, but this model offers a way to both personally reflect and as a school or district to reflect on what training or "movements" they choose to focus on, with connectedness

between caring adults at school, thus necessitating equity and inclusivity of all staff. As nurses know through experience and training, specifically, mental health and wellbeing, our general state of mind, impacts influence our perception of life, our interpretation of situations or others actions, our ability to concentrate and learn, cultivate social connections, our professional and personal life, our decisions, and our physical health. Though not a cure-all, nor necessarily easy, a genuine connection effort (at any level) contributes to overall wellbeing and should be "on the radar" of all staff at all times.

Limitations

This study offers findings representative of 24 participants from two suburban middle schools in the Midwest, and so is not generalizable; however, findings may offer insights for practice and future research in other contexts. Additionally, because the study focused on the experiences and perspectives of school staff members, aimed at filling that specific knowledge gap, direct student input is missing and should be explored with future research or a review of qualitative research that is inclusive of student voice (Jolly, Weiss, & Liehr, 2007).

Implications and Strategies

In response to the study's key findings, the following strategies may contribute to the immediate and long-term promotion of adolescent health and wellbeing by way of cultivating more, and more effective, connections between students and staff in middle school settings.

Reframing. Reframing staffs' mindsets, as well as those of the schools and districts, from seeing cultivating connections with students as inconsequential or simply a one-time event or attempt to connect to an opportunity and obligation to continuously engage in connection-building as a relational-process, as was demonstrated by the study participants. This mindset offers a simple first step in bridging the student-staff connectedness gaps in middle schools. Additionally, understand that connections are reciprocal and cannot be forced. Participants can create space, planting SEEDs which allow students to seize whatever connection-catalyst fits

their needs and in their own time. This opportunity-frame adds to the exploratory space that exists in school settings, while expanding other spatial dimensions as well, and would most certainly be bolstered by using an equity lens, being inclusive of all staff, and providing support and training aimed at capacity building at any or all of the Creating Space model levels. Study results imply a need to reframe the role of staff in cultivating SSC. Specifically, it calls for a reframing of an obligatory-type of responsibility to connect with students into an opportunity to create space wherein genuine connections develop and are nurtured organically and authentically.

A reframing of which staff are able to, or should, connect with students is also indicated by these study results. All staff have the potential to connect with students, and should be provided support, training and opportunities to do so. The act of inclusion, and seeing the assets of staff in all roles, just as they are encouraged to recognize the personhood of each student, creates community, contributing to a healthy school climate, and ultimately a more expansive and inclusive school and district culture.

Using the *Creating Space* model as a guide and/or reflective tool. Utilizing the Creating Space model (See *Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space* manuscript) and SSC process phases, by being mindful of or reflecting on them, offers a way through which staff could expand their own interpersonal development and build, reinforcing or augmenting their connection skills, regardless of their starting capacity. Capitalizing on and promoting intrapersonal growth and development of *all* staff (i.e. intrapersonal space as a key influence of expanding awareness), which is critical to enhancing (a) how space is created, (b) the subsequent connection-catalysts that are made available to students, and (c) how SSCs develop and are nurtured through relational artistry (i.e. conveying belief, care, and reverence).

Student-staff connections as outcomes and process. Recognize connections, known and unknown, and wellbeing as both part of the process and an outcome in and of themselves.

Embracing whole child whole school whole systems holistic and health promotion models, and a mindset towards the broader goal broad goal of contributing to societal wellbeing by promoting healthy development. Additionally, though research demonstrates an association between students' perceptions of being connected with caring adult at school and improved academic outcomes, it is not a cure-all. Perhaps, instead, connections, and the ecologically situated connection process, should be recognized as outcomes in and of themselves, that may have immediate or future impacts upon academics, behavior, wellbeing, and life skills.

Recognizing interconnections. Recognizing the interconnectedness between, and tending to, SSC-influencing factors at multiple ecological levels might be critical to building connections between students and staff, ultimately contributing to healthy youth development. Overall health and wellbeing, and mental and behavioral health concerns and violence that arises in school settings in particular, can be addressed through evidence-based practices (see National Center for Healthy Safe Children at American Institutes for Research, n.d.), are within the realm of school nursing practice, are amenable to change through connections with caring adults, and are a critical antecedent and component of social-emotional skills and equity-oriented school practices impacting climate and culture. The California Healthy Kids Survey (California Department of Education, 2018) developmental framework, for example, integrates the promotion of resilience, social-emotional learning and trauma-informed systems, similar to an Aspen Institute (2018) statement that "rather than being pursued as two separate bodies of work, the field needs to identify ways in which equity and social, emotional, and academic development can be mutually reinforcing" (p. 1).

Conclusion

Cultivating healthy connections is critical to preventing problems and promoting overall healthy youth development. While SSCs that satisfy the Search Institutes (2018b) criteria for developmental relationships might be particularly valuable, healthy connections between students

and caring-adults during middle school, occurring with varying levels of depth, have the potential to positively impact adolescent health, wellbeing and academic outcomes, as well as being an outcome in their own right.

The constructivist grounded theory methodology guiding this study aided in uncovering an expansive understanding of how middle school staff go about connecting with students, and the specific steps and actions through which they do this, namely the five phases SSC process imbued with actions that convey belief, care, and reverence. These connection-supporting processes can be engaged in by *any* and *all* school staff in a variety of meaningful ways. A simple first step is the reframing of connection-building as an ongoing relational-processes followed by the designation of resources (e.g. time, opportunities, financial, climate/cultural shifts) to support follow through. The intentionality, authenticity and responsive attentiveness with which staff engage with students through the frame of opportunity, and as well as the ways in which staff convey their belief in, care for and reverence towards students, will undoubtedly be felt/perceived by students.

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Chapter 6

Synthesis

*Note: References for this chapter are included in the cumulative bibliography.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore and illuminate the social process middle-school staff members engage in as they attempt to connect with students through their various professional roles. This exploration is situated within the ecological context of a school setting and influenced by myriad factors across the social-ecological spectrum. Gaining a tacit understanding of the student-staff connection (SSC) process, as was done in this study, offers a theoretical perspective of *how* and *what* staff do to connect with students which could guide further research and the development of evidence-based practices.

The findings presented in this section reflect a theoretical and practical integration of Creating Space and SSC across the chapters of this dissertation and addresses the original study aims by describing the SSC process and bringing to light various factors influencing the process, as facilitators, barriers or at times both. The purpose of this synthesis chapter, then, is to summarize and integrate the study findings within relevant theoretical, scientific and socio-political context, as well as offer implications for practice and future research. I do this by first describing the overarching theory that I propose as being the way in which school staff members build connections with students in their respective middle-school settings. This overview includes a unified explanation of the core category, Creating Space, and the relationship between the interdependent sub-processes and influential ecological factors that impact the SSC process. Next I describe the significance of these findings for healthy youth development and connectedness science, with relevance for nursing, education, and public health. I then contextualize the findings within the auspices of population health nursing, relating nursing science with care, equity and whole-systems healing. Implications for practice and future research are offered, and the chapter concludes with a personal reflection in the form of a statement of gratitude and hope.

Integration of Findings

Findings from this study provide insight into the social processes involved in student-staff connection building, as well as factors that have the potential to facilitate or inhibit that process. Buttressed by (a) the notion that prioritizing adolescent health at a population level is an efficacious approach to promoting health and wellbeing across communities and generations, (b) the imperativeness of approaching risk-prevention and health promotion from a positive, strengths and resilience-based mindset, and (c) the promise that resides in harnessing social connections between caring adults and youth in schools, as elucidated through the literature review (Chapter 2), the study findings are rich and compelling. The constructivist grounded theory methodology framing and guiding the study provides the scaffolding necessary to recognize patterns in the participants' stories and actions by first exploring the data in detail through line-by-line coding and process-mapping, leading to the descriptive, phasic nature of the SSC process, and the uncovering of the latent processes underlying SSC. Chapter 3, and the methods sections in each of the manuscripts presented in Chapters 4 and 5, recount the iterative data collection and analysis process progressing from particulars to the more abstract understanding of the patterning exhibited by the participants. With attention to my positionality and worldview, accomplished through constant reflection and reflexive writing, the findings were co-constructed with the participants. Their stories, experiences, incidences of connection and disconnection with students, and interpretations of what factors influence the SSC process, and in what ways, provided the foundation for the *Integrative Creating Space Theory*.

What this study uncovered is that although school connectedness and the value of connecting with and building relationships with students are critical components to healthy youth development, in school and beyond, school staff are not, and cannot, "make" connections happen. These caring adults convey their belief in, care for and reverence towards students while enacting the SSC process phases beginning with intending and hoping to connect (phase 1), then engaging

with students through some type of an initial encounter (phase 2), which may occur circumstantially or be intentionally initiated by a staff person, and then whenever possible "trying" again by circling back (phase 3). What is curious about the process is that, from the participants' perception, they recognized they were able to "try", but ultimately it was up to the student to accept their attempts to connect. This insight by participants provoked the idea explicated in the second manuscript (Chapter 5) that a reframing of connection-building from a single attempt or action to connect to an ongoing relational process mindset through which staff have both an opportunity and an obligation to continuously engage in. If they were to move on to expanding the connection (phase 4) at any level, building on micro-connections or engaging in a more robust developmental relationship (Search, 2018), their efforts must be perceived as genuine and be internalized and valued by the student. It is at that point that participants might recognize the existence of a connection and subsequently see an impact (phase 5). However, as with the connection process, the variability and visibility of the impact is dependent on each student. Many participants recounted incidents of obvious connection with students, while also describing experiences of hoping but never knowing if they connected. Many described having such a hope, or even an assumption, that there was indeed some level of connection and impact whether or not they were able to recognize it. Sometimes participants recognized that a student perceived their interaction as a connection at a later time (months or years later), experienced being positively surprised by a student's actions or reactions when they thought there was a lack of connection, and numerous variations of connection stories revealing impacts over time.

The participants' reflections on what may support or hinder the connection process, and their description of process-influencing factors across ecological-levels, is what gave rise to the broader social process in which they were engaging. The majority of their responses to the question of connectedness barriers and facilitators were intra and interpersonal in nature. Through the exploration of each of those categories, and their varying properties and dimensions,

it became apparent that participants were not only engaging in the SSC process, but they were *Creating Space* wherein any number of potential *connection-catalysis* may spark something in a student that would then develop into a connection. Thus, participants were still "trying" to connect, as is represented by the SSC process phases, imbued with the ways in which they convey their belief in, care for, and reverence towards students, but at a deeper and more expansive level they were cultivating connections by *Creating Space* (i.e. interpersonal, interpersonal, exploratory, ecological, temporal) as is discussed extensively in the Chapter 4 manuscript. That manuscript, *Cultivating Student-Staff Connections in Middle School: An Integrative Theory of Creating Space* explicates the incredibly complex, yet paradoxically simple, intrapersonal sub-processes participants integrate into how they Create Space and cultivate connections within that space.

Participants' descriptions of their approach to working with and connecting with students were frequently characterized as being "nebulous" and "natural". That was the complex-simple paradox surrounding the connection process this study aimed to explore. The most coherent way I found to illustrate what they were saying and how they were interacting with students, staff and families, was to separate their explanations into varying levels of abstraction. The most concrete and discernible level is described as demonstrating relational artistry, wherein the sub-processes of demonstrating belief in, care for, and reverence towards students (i.e. through presence; noticing, asking, and listening; empowering; etc.) and the SSC process, phases 1 through 5, manifest. However, the impetus for actions at this level, labeled as praxis-level, is rooted in both the unique personhood of each participant (i.e. two transitional-level processes of *embracing our shared humanness* and *equilibrating with empathy*) and the more abstract expanding awareness level described simply as *seeing within, beyond and between*. Though all of these processes are interdependent, it was helpful to separate them as a way to explore the properties and dimensions

within each, and then explicate the relationship as a complete model, as is done in grounded theory.

In summary, the staff employ a number of abstract, intrapersonal processes, and both subtle and more obvious, concrete interpersonal actions, that facilitate the creation of intrapersonal (for themselves and the student), interpersonal, temporal, ecological, and exploratory space, wherein some *connection-catalyst* is embraced by the student leading to a perceived connection with a caring adult that created that space. As one Chinese proverb states, "Teachers can open the door, but you must enter by yourself". Connecting is, by nature, interrelational, so a student must be wanting, willing and open to a connection, caring adults simply need to *Create Space*, or "open the door", for that to happen.

Significance and Relevance for Nursing

Findings from this study are critical to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the elusive social process underlying phenomenon of connectedness. Though connectedness is a known developmental asset contributing to wellbeing and protecting against many social and health maladies, this study adds to the existing science around caring youth-adult (CYA) connection by offering a nuanced understanding of how, in practice, school personnel develop such connections with students. This study highlights the importance of using ecological, resilience, and health and wellbeing perspectives to explore SSC as a phenomenon. The study is unique in that it bridges education and health and is interpreted using a public health nursing lens with a specific focus on the SSC process grounded in the perspectives and actions of middle school staff in varying roles.

Additionally, although much of the student relationship-building onus has been placed on teachers, I argue that any and all staff in schools can and do impact students with even the simplest of interactions, as they all impact school climate and culture. Each of them have an opportunity to cultivate connections with students by *Creating Space*, with intentionality, in

whatever professional role and in whatever ways are authentic for them, which then deepens their student-centeredness and guides them to respond attentively the needs of any student. When they are able to see students for who they are, regardless of circumstance, behaviors, conditions, or any other perceived or constructed identities, staff can connect strategically, but with heart and wisdom. Arguably, cultivating connections might benefit staff and doing so through intentionality, authenticity and responsible attentiveness offers a path unique to each staff person through which they can develop their relational artistry skills, which are essential not only with students but in life. Additionally, when connection-building with students is framed as an opportunity and accomplished by *Creating Space*, as opposed to being obligatory and prescriptive, staff might be liberated from culpability and shame that sometimes accompanies not having a connection, or at least not one that is recognized in the traditional sense of student behavior, achievement, etc. Instead, staff might be empowered to *Create Space* in their own unique way, recognizing that all their interactions matter and that a connection may or may not be seen or known immediately, yet have immense potential

Nurses are uniquely situated as contributors to this adolescent health-focused movement because they a) are promoters of person-centered, population-oriented health and wellbeing throughout the lifecourse, b) engender the strong, discipline-specific, theoretical underpinnings of nursing with a holistic approach to addressing health from a person-environment perspective, and c) are grounded by the profession's social justice roots. As such, perhaps these findings could inform, or contribute to, existing or new healthy youth development "interventions" or approaches aimed at enhancing caring relationships between adolescents and caring adults that might be facilitated by nurses in schools, through public health or community health settings.

Importantly, and more immediately, I hope this study contributes to the advocacy for equitable and inclusive, yet individualized and culturally responsive/relevant, population health promotion efforts focusing on adolescence, a healing renewal of the social connection and

community inherent in our shared humanity, a shift in our collective understanding and valuing of interconnectedness from a whole-systems perspective, and a call to action for all caring adults to engage with youth in ways that can create space for connections of any type, especially ones that may become influential developmental relationships (Search Institute, 2018b). Above all, living through, and acting from, intentionality, authenticity, and compassion (responsive attentiveness), as the participants in this study do, will contribute to the healing, peace and wholeness humanity and our planet so desperately need; it is a call to action, for youth and adults alike, to galvanize an expanding human consciousness and collective aspiration for universal wellbeing and a peaceful world.

Limitations

Despite the inclusion of multiple data sources, perspectives from 24 staff participants in varying professional roles, and an extensive and lengthy analysis were employed in this study, the resulting categories are as Dey (1999) describes, "*suggested* by data" (in Charmaz, 2014, p. 215) and lean towards 'theoretical sufficiency' (Dey, 1999, p. 257) as opposed to a strict notion of theoretical saturation often considered the gold standard in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). As such, these findings are not necessarily generalizable to other school communities or youth serving settings, however, they offer a framework for further exploration. This study was intentionally focused on exploring the student-staff connection phenomenon from the perspective of school staff, however, student voices are critical to a complete understanding and the absence of their input is therefore a limitation of this study. Another limitation is that participants in this study identify connecting with students as a priority and this was the focus of the study, so there are no examples of "negative cases" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 198) per se, other than a few participants revealing their journey from being more academically focused prior to consciously integrating student relationship building and some hearsay reports of other staffs' struggles. As such, future research, potentially with staff that identify as struggling with the relationship-first philosophy or

their own ability to cultivate connections with students, will offer more insight into perspectives opposing the proposed theory.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Understanding how student-staff connections develop, from the perspective of caring adults interacting with students in school settings, with an awareness of circumstance and context, provides critical insights with potential to fuel healthy-youth development promoting approaches. The primary implication for practice is reframing how and with whom connections with students are cultivated, and bolstering those adults' capacity for *Creating Space* wherein such connections can develop and flourish. Engaging in practice and research with an equity lens, including attention to social determinants of health, a social-justice orientation and attention to the necessity and value of promoting the social-emotional and relational skills of both students and adults, is not only imperative, but is aligned with a Whole-Systems Healing (Kreitzer, Felgen, &, Roach, 2014) approach. School personnel, and researchers exploring the SSC phenomenon, might consider using the Creating Space framework as a guide or reflection tool. Future studies might also explore the SSC process in other schools or youth serving settings. Importantly, such studies should be inclusive of any and all staff that interact with students. Lastly, the inclusion of adolescents' perspectives is critical to confirming or refuting, therefore expanding, our understanding of SSC as a social process.

A Statement of Grace, Gratitude, and Hope

I am forever grateful to have had the opportunity to engage with and learn from the participants in this study, and the students they interacted with and shared stories about, for they have shown me the grace with which we can all embody connecting with one another, and particularly with young people. My closing statement and personal transformation as a result of the last 6 years of doctoral work and two years of research echoes the following, often summarized as "be the change you wish to see in the world":

> We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do. — (Mahatma Gandhi, source date and p. not known)

The participants in this study embodied Gandhi's words and inspire me to do the same. Drawing on our inner-resources, interconnectedness, and natural inclination towards resilience, we each have the capacity to expand our awareness. Importantly, though this study was focused on staff in schools, anyone can promote healthy youth development by engaging with youth through developmental relationships (Search, 2018b, 2018c). These simple actions will undoubtedly contribute to the development of one's own inner peace and wellbeing, and that of young people, with an outward transformational movement towards a collective vision of global peace and universal wellbeing.

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Appendix A. University of Minnesota Study IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

Human Research Protection Program
Office of the Vice President for Research

D528 Mayo Memorial Building
420 Delaware Street S.E.
MMC 820
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Phone: 612-626-5654
Fax: 612-626-6061
Email: irb@umn.edu
http://www.research.umn.edu/subjects/

November 21, 2016

Windy M Fredkove
Pediatrics & Adolescent Health
717 Delaware St SE Room 353
Minneapolis, MN 55414

RE: "Exploring how School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings: A Grounded Theory Study"

IRB Code Number: 1611P99521

Dear Ms. Fredkove:

The referenced study was reviewed by expedited review procedures and approved on November 21, 2016, through November 20, 2017, inclusive. If you have applied for a grant, these dates are required for certification purposes as well as the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA 00004003). A report form will be sent out two months before the expiration date.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval of this study includes the consent form received November 9, 2016.

The IRB would like to stress that subjects who go through the consent process are considered enrolled participants and are counted toward the total number of subjects, even if they have no further participation in the study. Please keep this in mind when calculating the number of subjects you request. This study is currently approved for 40 subjects. If you desire an increase in the number of approved subjects, you will need to make a formal request to the IRB.

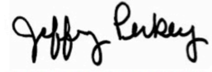
The code number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

As the Principal Investigator of this project, you are required by federal regulations to inform the IRB of any proposed changes in your research that will affect human subjects. Changes should not be initiated until written IRB approval is received. Unanticipated problems and adverse events should be reported to the IRB as they occur. Research projects are subject to continuing review and renewal. Notify the IRB when you intend to close this study by submitting the Study Inactivation Request form. If you have any questions, call the IRB office at 612-626-5654.

On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success with your research.

Driven to Discover℠

Sincerely,



Jeffery Perkey, CIP, MLS
IRB Analyst

CC: Carolyn Porta

Appendix B. University of Minnesota IRB Approval of Protocol Change: Parent Letter

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Route this form to: See instructions below v2.0 | Revised August 2015

Change In Protocol Request

Instructions:

Use this form when submitting change requests to approved IRB protocols. This form is for use when the changes are initiated by the PI. Do not use this form to respond when changes are requested by the IRB. Please do not use this form when responding to changes requested in a stipulation or deferral letter.

Submit this form to the Human Research Protection Program:

Electronic Submission:
Submit to: irb@umn.edu
PI must submit request using University of Minnesota e-mail Account.

The UMN IRB reviewed and APPROVED this submission including all attachments listed on this form by expedited review

Jeffery Perkey — Digitally signed by Jeffery Perkey Date: 2017.01.20 15:45:53 -06'00'

IRB Protocol Information

IRB Study Number:	**1611P99521**
Principal Investigator:	Windy Fredkove
Primary Study Title:	Exploring how School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings: A Grounded Theory Study
Date of this Submission	1/18/2017
Study Includes	☐ Drug(s) / Biologic(s) ☐ Device(s)

Indicate the type of change(s)	Additional information/requirements
☐ Change(s) to Study Procedures/Protocol Amendment Protocol Version , Dated	**Does the change affect study design, change the study endpoint(s) or change the statistical method?** ☐ **No** ☐ Yes **Is this protocol under** Masonic Cancer Center's Cancer Protocol Review Committee **(CPRC) review?** ☐ No ☐ Yes, CPRC # If "Yes" is checked for ***both*** questions above, this submission (Change in Protocol form and any supporting documentation) must be reviewed by CPRC (CCPRC@umn.edu) and stamped as approved or acknowledged prior to review by the IRB. Please note that submissions not approved by the CPRC will be returned to the PI.
☐ Notice of Closure to Accrual	
☐ Recruitment changes/Advertisements	Attach a copy of the revised material (flyer, script, etc.) with the submission
☐ Revised Investigator Brochure	Version , Dated
☐ Updated consent form	Include both an updated form with changes highlighted and a "clean" version
☒ Other	Briefly Describe:One of the middle school study sites would like to send a general notification to parents that there will be a researcher in the building.

1. **Briefly summarize the change(s). For protocol amendments, do not say "See summary of changes provided with amendment." Rather, summarize the nature of the significant revisions.**

One of the two middle schools would like to add, though not required by the University of Minnesota IRB or the school district research board, a general notification statement for parents. To honor that school's request, I have created a brief statement, which they have reviewed and support. Once approved by the University of Minnesota IRB the school will send this out with one of their weekly parent emails/phone cal updates that they use to communicate with parents on a regular basis. I will also notify the district research board of this added parent notification for that particular school.

2. **Describe the rationale for the change(s):**

Data for this study includes observations of school staff members throughout the school setting with a focus on the process staff go through as they connect with students. There are no student participants, however, staff will be observed as they interact with students. This particular school requested to send out a general parent notification to let parents know that a researcher will be in the building.

3. **How will these changes affect the overall risk to subjects in this study?**

This change will not affect the risk to study participants in any way.

4. **Do the changes to the study prompt changes to the consent form(s)?**

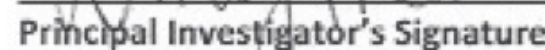
☒ **No.**
☐ **Yes. If yes:**

- **Attach a copy of the revised consent form(s) with changes tracked or highlighted as well as a clean copy.**

4.1 Will currently enrolled subjects will be notified of the changes?
☐ **No**
☐ **Yes, explain below how they will be notified** (i.e. subjects will be re-consented with the updated form once approved, subjects will be provided with an information sheet, subjects will be told of changes at next study visit, etc.).

5. **List and attach all documents included with this request, including version dates:**

The parent notification statement for the middle school site that requested parent notificaiton is attached.



Principal Investigator's Signature 1/18/17 **Date**

Cancer Protocol Review Committee (CPRC) Use Only:

Appendix C. University of Minnesota IRB Approval Protocol Change: Referral Sampling

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Route this form to: See instructions below v2.0

Revised August 2015

Change In Protocol Request

Instructions:

Use this form when submitting change requests to approved IRB protocols. This form is for use when the changes are initiated by the PI. Do not use this form to respond when changes are requested by the IRB. Please do not use this form when responding to changes requested in a stipulation or deferral letter.

The UMN IRB reviewed and APPROVED this submission including all attachments listed on this form by expedited review

Jeffery Perkey — Digitally signed by Jeffery Perkey Date: 2017.04.13 08:11:25 -05'00'

Submit this form to the Human Research Protection Program:

Electronic Submission:
Submit to: irb@umn.edu
PI must submit request using University of Minnesota e-mail Account.

IRB Protocol Information

IRB Study Number:	**1611P99521**
Principal Investigator:	Windy Fredkove
Primary Study Title:	Exploring how School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings: A Grounded Theory Study
Date of this Submission	4/4/2017
Study Includes	☐ Drug(s) / Biologic(s) ☐ Device(s)

Indicate the type of change(s)	Additional information/requirements
☐ Change(s) to Study Procedures/Protocol Amendment Protocol Version , Dated	**Does the change affect study design, change the study endpoint(s) or change the statistical method?** ☐ **No** ☐ Yes **Is this protocol under** Masonic Cancer Center's Cancer Protocol Review Committee **(CPRC) review?** ☐ No ☐ Yes, CPRC # If "Yes" is checked for ***both*** questions above, this submission (Change in Protocol form and any supporting documentation) must be reviewed by CPRC (CCPRC@umn.edu) and stamped as approved or acknowledged prior to review by the IRB. Please note that submissions not approved by the CPRC will be returned to the PI.
☐ Notice of Closure to Accrual	
☒ Recruitment changes/Advertisements	Attach a copy of the revised material (flyer, script, etc.) with the submission
☐ Revised Investigator Brochure	Version , Dated
☐ Updated consent form	Include both an updated form with changes highlighted and a "clean" version
☐ Other	Briefly Describe:

1. **Briefly summarize the change(s). For protocol amendments, do not say "See summary of changes provided with amendment." Rather, summarize the nature of the significant revisions.**

I would like to add snowball/referral sampling as a recruitment approach.

2. **Describe the rationale for the change(s):**

> Rational: Recruitment using the proposed procedure of presenting the study at staff meetings and requesting an email be sent out from a school administrator yielded less participants at one particular school, and fewer in a certain category of school staff, than anticipated. I would like to add snowball/referral sampling as an approach to recruitment at both schools so as to increase the number of participants at one school and to increase the number of participants in any category of school staff that are needed to address gaps in current data.
>
> Process: If approved, I would email current participants with a short statement requesting their assistance in referring other staff to the study if they are interested and willing to do so. I will attach a study summary/recruitment form to the email and ask them to share the information with other staff as they see fit. Interested participants must contact me directly. I will not contact potential participants on the recommendation of another staff member; rather, I will wait for interested participants to contact me.

3. **How will these changes affect the overall risk to subjects in this study?**

If the participant decides they would like to invite/encourage other staff members to participate in the study they may inadvertently risk their confidentiality by sharing with others that they are participating in the study.

4. **Do the changes to the study prompt changes to the consent form(s)?**

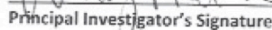
☒ **No.**
☐ **Yes. If yes:**

- **Attach a copy of the revised consent form(s) with changes tracked or highlighted as well as a clean copy.**

4.1 Will currently enrolled subjects will be notified of the changes?
☐ **No**
☐ **Yes, explain below how they will be notified** (i.e. subjects will be re-consented with the updated form once approved, subjects will be provided with an information sheet, subjects will be told of changes at next study visit, etc.).

5. **List and attach all documents included with this request, including version dates:**

Sample Email and Study Recruitment Form are attached.



Principal Investigator's Signature 4/4/17 **Date**

Cancer Protocol Review Committee (CPRC) Use Only:

Appendix D. University of Minnesota IRB Approval of Protocol Change: Additional Demographic Question and Member Checking Option

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

Human Research Protection Program
Office of the Vice President for Research

D528 Mayo Memorial Building
420 Delaware Street S.E.
MMC 820
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Phone: 612-626-5654
Fax: 612-626-6061
Email: irb@umn.edu
http://www.research.umn.edu/subjects/

APPROVAL OF MODIFICATION

June 26, 2018

Carolyn Porta

612-624-6179
porta@umn.edu

Dear Carolyn Porta:

On 6/26/2018, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Driven to Discover℠

Type of Review:	Modification
Title of Study:	Exploring how School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings: A Grounded Theory Study
Title of Submission	Modification #2 for Study Fredkove,W - How School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings
Investigator:	Carolyn Porta
IRB ID:	1611P99521
Submission ID	MOD00005478
Sponsored Funding:	None
Grant ID/Con Number:	None
Internal UMN Funding:	Internal grant program (e.g. OVPR, Cancer Center, Provost, AHC, GPS Alliance, IonE, IAS, or other) : Sofia Fund - For PhD or DNP students enrolled in the University of Minnesota School of Nursing whose research or systems change project focuses on public health or school nursing. Award details: *Funding limit for awards up to $1,500 per project. *The funds must be used for projects that stimulate better public health or school nursing though program evaluation or research projects. * Sofia funds cannot be used for tuition or student fees. Departmental funding : The A. Marilyn Sime Scholarship ($1,500) A. Marilyn Sime, PhD, RN, University of Minnesota School of Nursing Professor Emeritus, created this scholarship to encourage health professional students to broaden their personal and professional practice to include a working knowledge of integrative therapies and healing practices. This scholarship is the only student scholarship offered by the Center for Spirituality & Healing.
Fund Management Outside University:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed with this Submission:	• Member Check Email 6.23.18 IRB#1611P99521.pdf, Category: Other; • Participant Request for Information Email 6.23.18 IRB#1611P99521.pdf, Category: Other;

The IRB determined that the criteria for approval continue to be met and that this study continues to involve no greater than minimal risk.

Modifications/updates included:

As guided by the study data I would like to add an open-ended question to the demographic form for participants to report their race and ethnicity. To protect their privacy, this demographic data will be reported as a whole and not connected with each participants other demographic information. I originally planned to send an attached form, but given the simplicity of the request I believe an email response will be sufficient. I included instructions in the attached email.

In the same email I would like to send a request for participants interested in reviewing the manuscripts-in-progress as a method of member-checking. The request is detailed in the attached email.

I will send a brief email to each individual participant asking for this additional information. One participant has retired, one transferred to another district and one moved to another school within the district. They have all provided me with their new contact information so I will offer this to them as well.

If anyone is interested in participating in the member-check review process I will send out an official invitation email with the attached manuscripts later this summer. I have attached that proposed email document to this modification submission as well.

*Note - I was strongly considering having participants self-select pseudonyms; however, after more thought, given the nature of the study, the complexity and the potential participant burdens that may accompany the self-selection of pseudonyms, I decided that this is unnecessary. So I deleted this request from my original modification summary above, but wanted to recognize that change to avoid any confusion.

You will be sent a reminder from ETHOS to submit a Continuing Review submission for this study. You must submit your Continuing Review no later than 30 days prior to the last day of approval in order for your study to be reviewed and approved for another Continuing Review period. If Continuing Review approval is not granted before 10/15/2018, approval of this protocol expires immediately after that date.

You must also submit a Modification in ETHOS for review and approval prior to making any changes to this study.

If consent forms or recruitment materials were approved, those are located under the Final column in the Documents tab in the ETHOS study workspace.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the HRPP Toolkit Library on the IRB website.

For grant certification purposes, you will need the approval and last day of approval dates listed above and the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003).

Sincerely,

Bri Warner
IRB Analyst

We value feedback from the research community and would like to hear about your experience. The link below will take you to a brief survey that will take a minute or two to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will help us better understand what we are doing well and areas that may require improvement. Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Even if you have provided feedback in the past, we want and welcome your evaluation.

https://umn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_5BiYrqPNMJRQSBn

Appendix E. Consent Form

Consent Form

Project title: Exploring how School Staff Members Connect with Students in Middle School Settings: A Grounded Theory Study

You are invited to be in a research study focusing on the process through which you, as a staff member at a middle school, connect with students. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. **This study is being conducted by:** Windy Fredkove, PhD(c), MSN, RN, APHN-BC at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing in pursuit of a doctoral degree in Nursing.

You may be selected as a study participants if you:

- Work in or with a participating middle school at least 12 hours per week or more
- Have consistent, direct interaction with students that attend that school
- Have worked professionally with students for at least one year

Study background: The overall purpose of this study is to explore the process middle school staff go through as they connect with their students. More specifically, this study aims a) to explore the process through which various school personnel connect with their students in middle school settings, and b) to capture the emerging theory of the connectedness process, inclusive of multi-level factors that may influence that process.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following:

- Sign a consent form.
- Coordinate your schedule with the researcher via email or phone to facilitate your participation at your convenience.
- Complete a brief demographic form
- Participate in 2 individual interviews, each approximately 45-90 minutes.
- Agree to be observed/shadowed in your work environment for 3-4 hours on two separate occasions. Observations will focus on your interaction with students in your general practice or as you move about the school building during typical daily activities, and will not include private or confidential student meetings.
- Consider providing any additional study-related thoughts or reflections you may have in a post-interview survey.
- Provide feedback to the researcher regarding study themes and findings in a brief follow-up email or phone call near the end of the study.

Timing: It is anticipated that this study will begin in November, 2016. Your participation will likely begin, depending on the date of enrollment or wait-list status, between November, 2016 and April, 2017. Your total time of study involvement is estimated to be between 6 months and 1 year. Ideally, all data collection components of the study (i.e. interviews, observations and any follow-up contact) will be completed by June, 2017. However, given the nature of this study, it is possible that follow-up contacts may be extended into the fall semester 2017, but not beyond December 2017.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The study has risks:

- Although confidentially is required, there is a possibility that other colleagues in the school would observe you having contact with the researcher because a shadowing/observation experience is part of this study.
- The subject matter is not of a sensitive nature; however, if it becomes uncomfortable or challenging for you to remain in the study you have the right to leave the study at anytime.

The benefits to participation are: To share your stories and perspectives about how you and other staff develop meaningful connections with student.

Mandatory reporting: If you share information that indicates inappropriate or abusive student-staff relationships, the researcher is required, as a mandated reporter under Minnesota Statute 626.556, to report that information to legal authorities and your study participation would be terminated. The research would also notify a school administer.

Compensation: You will be provided a $10 gift card after each interview. You will receive a $20 gift card after each observation session you participate in. Additionally, I hope you will consider completing the post-interview survey and agree to a brief email or follow-up phone conversation to help clarify study findings, although those contacts will not receive compensation. The total compensation for full-completion of the study will be $60.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Any type of report or publication resulting from this study will not include any information that would make it possible to identify an individual participant. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. I, as the primary investigator, along with my advisors and transcriptionists will be the only people with access to the audio recordings. After the study is completed the data will be maintained and destroyed according to UMN IRB policy.

Voluntary nature of the study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your school or the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and questions: The researcher conducting this study is: Windy Fredkove. You may ask any questions you have at this time. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me by email at sols0011@umn.edu or by phone at 651-253-1613. Additionally you may contact my advisors Carolyn Porta at 612-624-6179 porta@umn.edu and Renee Sieving at 612-626-4527 or sievi001@umn.edu .
If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of consent: I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature:_______________________________________ Date: __________________

Signature of Investigator:__________________________ Date: ___________________

Appendix F. Interview Guide

Phase I Interview Guide (Original)

Date: Participant ID:
Start Time: Location:
End Time: Setting in school:

Introduction: Thank you for making the time to talk with me today. I am interested in learning about the process school staff go through as they interact with and attempt to build meaningful relationships and connections with their students. I'm also interested to find out what factors may play into, or are challenges for, that process.

	Initial Interview Questions	Notes
1	(*Introductory Question*) It would be helpful for me to learn a little bit about your background and role as we get started. **What is your position and how long have you worked in that position, either here or in other settings?**	
2	(Opening/Rapport Question) **What is your general approach to working with students?** **Probe:** What is your philosophical approach to engaging with youth?	
3	(*Definition Question*) This study is focused on learning about connections between students and school staff members. **So I am interested to know how you would describe connectedness as it relates to students and staff in the school setting?**	
4	(*Grand Tour Question*) **How do you, personally, go about connecting with students?** Grand Tour Follow-up Questions: a. **How do you know you are connecting with a student** b. **Tell me a story or give an example of a time you were able to connect with a student and the process that went into that connection?**	
5	(Contrast Question) **Do you have any examples or experiences you could share with me about a time that making a connection may have been challenging or you felt it was unsuccessful? What was different in that process?**	
6	(*Process Factors Question*) **What are some of the factors you see as influencing your ability to connect with students and how you go about connecting with students? These can be things that positively influence that process or those that may hinder that process. I'm interested in anything from personal factors to broader system-level factors, so feel free to speak about anything that comes to mind as potentially influential factors.**	

	Probes: What are some of the personal factors, specific to your life circumstances or experiences or common personal factors that are talked about with your colleagues, that you view as influencing the process of how you or other staff connect with students? Is there anything about students, individually, that you see as influencing the process of staff and students connecting? If so, how would you describe those factors? What have you noticed, if anything, about factors at the school district level, individual school setting or your particular practice area that influence your ability to connect, or how you go about connecting, with students? What come to mind as you think about factors that are external to the school setting?	
7	(*Process Question*) **If you had to summarize the process of connecting with students as a sequence of steps, stages, actions, events or maybe as a visual diagram, what would that be or look like? Would it be different for different students?**	
8	(*Triangulation & Transition Question*) **Have you ever received any training or professional development about connectedness or on how to better connect with students? What was that like? Do you think it was effective and influential on your ability to connect with students, or not?**	
9	(Triangulation Question) **Are there any policies, past training materials or other documents that you think would help me explore or understand the way in which students and staff interact in your school?**	
10	(*Closing Question*) **Before we end our discussion today is there anything else you want to add that you didn't have an opportunity to mention or is there something I missed that you think would be important for me to know?**	

Closing: Thank you again for your time and for sharing your expertise and experience with me for this this study. If something comes up or you have some insight after reflecting on what we talked about today and you want to share it with me, please feel free to do that with the post-interview survey form (provide the post-interview survey at this time). There is no expectation that you complete the survey, but I want to offer you an opportunity to share in case you think of things after this interview. I want to facilitate you communicating those thoughts with me because your voice and insights are what make this study what it is.

Appendix G. Student-Staff Connectedness Observational Protocol

Student-Staff Connectedness Observation Protocol

Observation schedule: Two shadowing, go-along-style participant observations, 3-4 hours each, will take place with each participant over the course of approximate 6 - 9 months.

Date: __________ **Participant ID:** __________
Start time: __________ **Location:** ______________________
End time: __________ **Setting within school:** ______________

Time	Action/Observation Notes	Related Post-Observation Reflections
Time	**Action/Observation Notes**	**Related Post-Observation Reflections**

Appendix H. Post-Interview Survey

Post-Interview Survey

This survey is an opportunity for you to share any thoughts or reflections that may come up for you after our interview, or at anytime during the study. I have put the original interview questions in the form as a guide, but you do not need to respond to specific questions, rather offer any general reflections or insights in a specific section, or in the general section at the bottom. If you do complete this form, please feel free to email it to me as an attachment or print it out, notify me, and I will schedule a time to pick it up.
Thank you, Windy

Email: sols0011@umn.edu
Participant ID (to be completed by the researcher): ___________________

Question	Reflection/Insight/ Thoughts
This study is focused on learning about connections between students and school staff members. I am interested to know how you would describe connectedness as it relates to students and staff in the school setting?	
How do you, personally, go about connecting with students? *a. How do you know you are connecting with a student* *b. Tell me a story or give an example of a time you were able to connect with a student and the process that went into that connection?*	
Do you have any examples or experiences you could share with me about a time that making a connection may have been challenging or you felt it was unsuccessful? What was different in that process?	
What are some of the factors you see as influencing your ability to connect with students and how you go about connecting with students? These can be things that positively influence that process or those that may hinder that process. I'm interested in anything from personal factors to broader system-level factors, so feel free to speak about anything that comes to mind as potentially influential factors. *What are some of the personal factors, specific to your life circumstances or experiences or common personal factors that are talked about with your colleagues, that you view as influencing the process of how you or other staff connect with students?* *Is there anything about students, individually, that you see as influencing the process of staff and*	

students connecting? If so, how would you describe those factors? *What have you noticed, if anything, about factors at the school district level, individual school setting or your particular practice area that influence your ability to connect, or how you go about connecting, with students?* *What come to mind as you think about factors that are external to the school setting?*	
If you had to summarize the process of connecting with students as a sequence of steps, stages, actions, events or maybe as a visual diagram, what would that be or look like? Would it be different for different students?	
Have you ever received any training or professional development about connectedness or on how to better connect with students? What was that like? Do you think it was effective and influential on your ability to connect with students, or not?	
Anything else you would like to share.	

Appendix I. Creating Space Reflection Tool: *Creating Space* Model Supplemental Document

SEEDing: A metaphorical interpretation of Creating Space and potential reflective tool

Participants in this study are able to a) **S**ee within, beyond and between, b) **E**mbrace our shared humanness, c) **E**quilibrate with empathy, and d) **D**emonstrate relational artistry. Engaging mindfully, genuinely and purposefully in each of these processes, inclusive of the intricate, nuanced actions within each, will undoubtedly cultivate a terrain abundant with seeds that will sprout, or sparks that may ignite, a connection between students and the caring adults that surround them at school. Moreover, participants cultivate connections by creating and integrating intrapersonal, interpersonal, ecological, temporal and exploratory space within which they SEED with intentionality, authenticity and responsive attentiveness. Metaphorically, the intentionality, authenticity, and responsive attentiveness imbued in the *Creating Space* process could, using the image of a burgeoning tree or blooming flower, be considered the bedrock. The trunk or stem and extending branches, then, are how school staff See, Embrace, Equilibrate with Empathy, and Demonstrate (SEED) their belief in, care and reverence for students. The connections that develop are represented by the budding of leaves from the branch or petals from the stem; with the actual spark or SEED being, at times unseen and known only from within the student/recipient, unique to each connection. As such, each leaf or petal represent the student in their one-of-a-kind beingness, inseparable from the whole, acknowledging the particular-universal paradox of interconnectedness. The space that is created, then, is part of a continuous cycle that contributes to and is influenced by the external and internal life at all ecological levels, within and outside of the plant, tree, flower, either depleting or nourishing it.

Staff and other caring adults outside of the school setting, have the opportunity to act as gardeners planting seeds with the potential to trigger a sense of connectedness in students. They also tend to the space (i.e. ecological, intrapersonal, interpersonal, exploratory, temporal) in

which the seedlings learn and grow. Expectedly, environmental factors at all ecological levels significantly impact the development of a garden, in this case a school promoting the healthy development and wellbeing of their students, and when possible should be shaped and wielded with the intention of providing protection for students. Yet, school staff members have an even more immediate opportunity within their control and purview, which is to simply cultivate connections by Creating Space.

The *Creating Space* model could be used as a guide for individual staff members to reflect on as they continue to enrich their own connection-developing capabilities, or might be a part of how they communicate with colleagues or administrators the many less-tangible or immeasurable ways in which they are trying to connect with students, as well as a way to identify areas for growth. Communicating the "unseen" components of staffs' contribution to cultivating connectedness in their school is critical to consider when creating documents and policies, selecting professional development trainings, considering funding priorities, and recognizing existing assets (i.e. individual-level strengths and passions, professional expertise, student-groups, the potential for family and community involvement). Taking into consideration the types of space that staff are creating, and how they are creating it, provides an integrated understanding of the multi-level backdrop of interdependent processes supporting the cultivation of SSC. In essence, this model may be used as a guide, but an integration of intrapersonal development and the capacity to recognize interconnectedness, with underlying compassion, a deep intentionally of care for students, and an authenticity that is beyond ego, are likely the key ingredients/capabilities that must be embraced and bolstered in order to Create Space for connections to develop and flourish.