

# *‘She means the world to me’.* Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to Explore Secondary School Students’ Experiences of Student-Teacher Relationships

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# Abstract

This research focuses on the lived experiences of six young people (YP) in year 9 or 10 attending a mainstream secondary school, with a particular focus on their experiences of student-teacher relationships (STR). The participant group all attended the same mainstream secondary school, were on the school’s special educational needs register for social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs and received provision considered *‘additional or different’* (Department for Education, 2015)for behaviour.

The study underscores the profound influence of these relationships on students' educational journeys, emphasising the need for a deeper understanding of relational practices in education, especially from the perspective of YP. While the existing literature acknowledges the significance of STR in educational settings, there is a noticeable gap in understanding the experiences of students within these relationships, particularly in the context of mainstream secondary schools. To bridge this gap, the study utilises semi-structured interviews and applies the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research method.

The chosen IPA methodology follows the Larkin et al. (2021) approach and aligns with an epistemological and ontological position rooted in phenomenology. The study's findings reveal three significant Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The first GETs theme, 'She means the world to me,' highlights students' unique bond with their teachers, underscoring closeness and intuitive understanding. The second GETs theme focuses a spotlight on students' experiences of ‘unfairness and disempowerment,' in STR, which sheds light on power imbalances and feelings of injustice impacting their learning and well-being. Lastly, the third GETs theme underscores the importance of 'security and protection’ within STR, fostering a positive learning environment and influencing students' academic and emotional development.

This study seeks to amplify student voices in the discussion on relational practice in education. It concludes by offering recommendations spanning school policies and systemic changes, emphasising the need for a more comprehensive approach to STR that encompasses students' experiences and well-being. In essence, this study advances our comprehension of STR in secondary schools and underscores the essential nature of considering and integrating students' perspectives in shaping future educational policies and practices.

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# Abbreviations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| AT | Attachment Theory |
| CPD | Continuous Professional Development |
| DfE | Department of Education |
| EPs | Educational Psychologists |
| EPS | Educational Psychology Service |
| ES | Experiential Statements |
| GETs | Group Experiential Themes |
| IPA | Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis |
| PETs | Personal Experiential Themes |
| PTMF | Power Threat Meaning Framework |
| RQ1 | Research Question 1 |
| RQ2 | Research Question 2 |
| RQ3 | Research Question 3 |
| SDT | Self-Determination Theory |
| SEMH | Social Emotional and Mental Health |
| SENCo | Special Educational Needs Coordinator |
| STR | Student Teacher Relationships |
| YP | Young People |
| YPs | Young People’s |
| ZPD | Zone of Proximal Development |

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Overview of Thesis

In the initial chapter, the groundwork is established through the introduction of key terminology, definitions, and the elucidation of research inquiries. The current context of Student-Teacher Relationships (STR) is discussed as well as the ‘identification of need’ in school systems. Chapter Two is partitioned into four segments. The first expounds upon various theories concerning the dynamics of STR. The second part delves into motivational theories associated with these dynamics. The third part synthesises pertinent research on STR while the fourth part provides a cogent justification for the necessity of this research. Chapter Three unfolds in dual parts. The first elucidates my ontological and epistemological standpoint, outlines key concepts pertinent to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), and addresses ethical considerations and quality benchmarks inherent in qualitative research. The second part delineates the procedural and design aspects, encompassing inclusion criteria, sample selection, and a detailed overview of the IPA analysis procedure. Chapter Four seamlessly integrates findings and discussions, presenting key emergent themes and immersing the reader in participants' experiences. Finally, Chapter 5 revisits research inquiries, synthesises the key findings, and significance derived from findings, proffers recommendations, and reflects upon the study's strengths, limitations, and implications for future research.

## Research interests

Chapter One discusses the events that inspired my interest in STR and contributed to shaping my identity and position as a researcher. I outline the research questions and definitions that will be used in this thesis.

This topic piqued my interest since it emphasises the significance of connections and relationships in education, which is relevant to my experience as a teaching assistant, school science teacher, and Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo). I was drawn to this area of interest following a period of reflection on connections I shared with the students I taught and the importance those relationships had to me. This introspection, in turn, led me to question how Young People (YP) experienced and navigated the STR.

It was during this time that I recognised the intrinsic value of interactions and relational environments I cultivated within my classroom. These interactions with me were dynamic, dialogical, and co-constructive, shaping both my identity and students' identities. These were not one-sided partnerships but mutual interactions, underscoring the importance of interpersonal bonds in the educational process. This meant I wanted to focus my research on experiences of STR for YP attending mainstream secondary schools.

## The current context of student teacher relationships

In part, my focus on STR aims to engage with the evolving discourse on relational practices in schools. I am prompted to explore whether this shift has emerged in response to the previously prevalent behavioural approaches in education.

The behaviourist paradigm is deeply ingrained in UK schools, backed by both academic sources (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Hart, 2010) and institutional support from government policies (Department for Education, 2016) and the school inspectorate system (Ofsted, 2014). This collective endorsement reinforces the traditional belief that managing children's behaviour through a system of sanctions and rewards is essential for improving classroom performance and fostering pro-social behaviour. However, a recent trend indicates a shift toward relational approaches in schools as a response to the limitations of this one-size-fits-all approach, which may prove ineffective for some YP (Parker et al., 2016).

This shift prompts a critical examination of the reasons behind the growing resistance to behaviourist approaches. The reconsideration often adopts a trauma-informed perspective, offering a rationale for embracing more relational approaches. This emphasis on trauma-informed strategies aligns with the increasing attention given to the broader impact of neuroscience in education, commonly known as the 'neuroturn' (De Vos, 2017), with a noticeable momentum in the discourse (Billington, 2017). However, the translation of neuroscience concepts into practical policies has encountered challenges (Bradbury, 2021), and the field's portrayal as cutting-edge (McGimpsey et al., 2017) raises concerns about potential oversimplification, risking the portrayal of YP in a 'deficit model'. The resurgence of trauma-informed language underscores the necessity for a nuanced and cautious approach to these evolving trends, acknowledging the potential contributions of neuroscience to education while critically evaluating the claims made.

While acknowledging the movement toward relational approaches, it's essential to question why these approaches may not meet the needs of all children to avoid essentialist or 'medical model' lenses in describing YP. This critique challenges the prevailing discourse that leans towards a 'medical model,' a narrative gaining strength in schools, potentially placing behavioural issues solely within the child rather than considering broader contextual factors (Billington et al., 2022). Additionally, the emergence of this narrative prompts reflection on whether it is a response to ‘perceived need’ in schools, particularly concerning behaviour, and the rising demand for educational psychologist support related to Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs.

## Identifying need in the school system

Schools use the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice to identify needs, notably through the SEMH label. A critical psychology perspective highlights the ambiguity of the SEMH label and potential stigmatisation, but pragmatic considerations support its retention due to its integral role in SEN discourse (Penketh, 2014). Ambiguities within SEMH, reminiscent of earlier classifications like Behaviour, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD), persist with unclear identification thresholds and a focus on behaviour (Norwich and Eaton, 2015). Arguments against labelling note negative implications (Lauchlan and Boyle, 2007). The increased focus on SEMH needs in schools may overlook societal factors, neglecting personal and environmental influences (Gillman et al., 2000; Timimi, 2009).

The current emphasis on mental health aligns with societal trends, questioning whether perceived needs within schools shape SEMH adoption. Recognising SEMH limitations is crucial, as it may oversimplify student needs and perpetuate a 'within-child' perspective. Therefore, supporting school staff, families, and students to recognise broader contextual factors is vital (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The reliance on SEMH influences ‘need identification’ but presents challenges in forming a homogenous group due to its potentially oversimplified nature. This tension around labelling becomes apparent when trying to identify a homogeneous group for research, as discussed in Chapter 3.

## Research questions

My research questions reflect my epistemological stance and aim to grasp participants' experiences of STR in schools. These are open-ended, exploratory questions aimed at understanding experiences and meanings.

Primary Research Question (RQ)

The primary research question serves as a gauge to assess the extent to which the research has accomplished its intended goals.

***RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the STR for students attending mainstream secondary school?***

Secondary research questions

As per Smith (2004), secondary research inquiries often take a theory-informed direction and are commonly explored within an interpretive framework. In the context of employing the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, secondary research queries can serve to facilitate theoretical exploration without the primary objective of hypothesis testing.

***RQ2: What can educationalists learn from the lived experiences of STR for secondary school students?***

***RQ3: What could policymakers learn from the lived experience of STR for secondary school students?***

## Definitions

Student Teacher Relationships

The dynamics of STR can be separated into four pivotal components. Firstly, it involves the distinctive qualities exhibited by both educators and students, as observed by Pianta et al. (2003). Secondly, this encompasses the subjective perceptions of these relationships by each participant, as elucidated by Sabol & Pianta (2012). Thirdly, it delves into the intricate interactions between these parties, which can either nurture or hinder such perceptions, as noted by Liu et al. (2021). Lastly, the influence of external factors stemming from the surrounding environment, as expounded upon by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), completes this definition of STR.

Relational

Gergen's (2009) definition of 'relational' informs my understanding of the term and has broad implications for interpreting STR in the classroom. Understanding STR through a relational lens contends that events, things, or entities are not isolated but intricately linked to their context. This theory highlights the dynamic, interdependent nature of relationships and interactions, shaping our view of the world based on how these elements relate within a social and cultural framework. It emphasises the critical importance of connections, interactions, and mutual influence (Gergen, 2009).

Relational theory posits that STRs are not isolated, disconnected entities in a vacuum from the surrounding context. It rejects the idea of understanding phenomena in isolation, emphasising that everything is entwined within a web of relationships. This viewpoint moves the emphasis from the conventional view of students and teachers as separate entities to the importance of connections in education. Gergen's theory will be discussed further in the literature review

Participant group

The participant group was defined by two terms:

1) Those on the Schools Special Educational Needs (SEN) register for Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. The study will utilise the officially recognised term 'SEMH' as per the guidelines set forth by the Department for Education and Department of Health (DfE/DoH, 2015). The adopted definition aligns with the revised 2015 SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015).

2) In addition to this, receiving provision that is *‘additional or different’* (Department for Education (DfE) and Department of Health (DoH), 2015, p. 113) for behaviour.

## Introduction Summary

This chapter delves into the background and motivations behind the study of STR in mainstream secondary schools. My professional journey, from a teaching assistant to a SENCo, inspired a reflective exploration of the significance of relationships in education. Focusing on the evolving discourse around relational practices, the chapter questions the traditional behaviourist paradigm entrenched in UK schools and examines the emerging shift toward relational approaches. The critique extends to the identification of ‘need’ in the school system, particularly through the SEMH label. Research questions and definitions are outlined, with a commitment to exploring the lived experiences of STR for students and deriving insights for educators and policymakers. The chapter sets the stage for further chapters that offer an in-depth exploration of relational dynamics in education, emphasising the interconnectedness of individuals within their contextual and social frameworks.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

The objective of this current review is to explore the experiences of Student-Teacher Relationships (STR) for students in United Kingdom (UK) secondary schools. The first part of the literature review will centre on exploring the dynamic between students and teachers through diverse theoretical frameworks. These encompass attachment theory (AT), sociocultural theory, humanistic theory and Gergen's relational approach. Part 2 focuses on motivational theories that link to STR. These theories from different paradigms will be critically evaluated, considering STR while acknowledging the possibility of alternative theories being applicable.

The third section of the literature review will look at empirical studies done to assess the influence of STR on academic achievement, engagement, and emotional and social growth. It will also point out gaps in the literature and recommend areas for further research. This critical literature evaluation was done with an emphasis on studies of STR for students attending mainstream secondary schools.

This review has synthesised information and findings from a diverse range of sources, encompassing both printed books, grey literature, and peer-reviewed publications. I included grey literature within this thesis because there was limited research focused on students’ experiences of STR. Government policy is included because it can give a more comprehensive picture of the present STR landscape and emphasise the practical consequences of research findings. This chapter will finish by identifying the current gap in research and justifying the need for this study to address and overcome that gap.

## Part 1: STR from a Theoretical Perspective

On average, children in the United Kingdom spend approximately one-sixth of their lifespan attending school, during which a significant portion of their time is spent in the company of their educators. The interaction with educators constitutes the second-most significant segment of the day, following the duration spent with guardians at home. It's crucial to focus on how teachers and students connect with one another, which is frequently done through the lens of study and theory on parent-child relationships.

Models for framing STR and the roles students and teachers play in fostering them are provided by several theories. The significance of these connections is crucial for learning, development, and emotional well-being and has been elucidated through theories, research, and philosophical viewpoints. Some of these pivotal theories will be examined.

### Attachment theory

Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1938) emphasises the bond between children and their carers, and the connection to personality development and welfare. Freud's theory suggests early attachments affect social interactions and self-regulation, which was later supported by Bowlby (1988). To control emotions, develop a personality, and build relationships, Bowlby argued that early connections with primary carers are essential, strengthening Freud's theory. Bowlby defined attachment as a *"lasting psychological connectedness between human beings"* (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). Through this connectedness, a stable relationship develops through consistent, attentive, and empathetic interactions between the infant and its primary carer. These interactions improve cognitive processes that regulate emotions, build moral reasoning, and establish security, self-awareness, and empathy (Schore, 2001; Sroufe & Siegel, 2011).

Bowlby believed insecure attachments evolved if early interactions with the primary carer were unresponsive, inconsistent, or negative, leaving the infant unable to soothe themselves (Sroufe & Siegel, 2011). Bowlby hypothesised that the early experiences of a child with insecure attachments may alter their mental processes and their perception of themselves and others, referred to as the 'internal working model’. Thus, they perceive others as unsafe, untrustworthy, or undependable, and themselves as undeserving of care (Bowlby, 1988). This powerful bond between a child and their primary care-giver establishes patterns for secondary attachments like those with teachers.

Bowlby's theory, when viewed through a feminist lens, faces challenges due to its focus on ‘dysfunctional families’ and its implied call for parental responsibility, often aimed at mothers (Knudson-Martin, 2012). In the early stages of AT, there was a belief in the inherent mother-child connection, downplaying external influences (Birns, 1999). Feminist perspectives oppose the idea of a predetermined mother-child bond, emphasising its susceptibility to social influences (Birns, 1999; Bliwise, 1999). In the context of AT and STR, it could be argued that the theory's focus on interpersonal connections aligns with feminist principles. According to Jonathan and Knudson-Martin (2012), educators should place attachment processes within a broader sociocultural framework, considering gender, culture, and power dynamics. Knudson-Martin (2012) emphasises the significance of understanding AT in relation to larger social factors rather than in isolation.

Incorporating AT into education (Ainsworth, 1989) gives a theoretical framework to understand the role of STR. Adult-child connections at school, according to AT, play a critical role in supporting cognitive and self-regulation development by establishing a sense of security in Young People (YP) and allowing them to explore their academic and social environments (Ainsworth, 1989). In the context of STR, attachment can be seen as the teacher taking on a reciprocal caregiving role towards the child. Riley supports this by stating, "*The adult attachment model of reciprocal care-giving and care-seeking is a more appropriate lens through which to view the teacher-student relationship"* (Riley, 2009, p. 626). Driscoll and Pianta (2010) suggest teachers can be perceived as 'attachment figures' who provide supportive relationships, proven to mitigate academic challenges for students who may otherwise struggle. Moreover, a strong bond with a kind and compassionate teacher can shield students from the negative impacts of poor relationships with their primary caregivers (Yan et al., 2016), underscoring the potential of these relationships.

Incorporating AT into STR poses challenges, as it doesn't guarantee students develop a ‘fully-fledged’ attachment towards their teachers (Schuengel & van Ijzendoorn, 2001). While teachers may serve as secure bases and safe havens, and students may exhibit attachment behaviours, this doesn't necessarily result in a lasting, deeply rooted attachment bond as defined by Ainsworth (1989).

An attachment bond, in Ainsworth's terms, entails a profound and lasting connection where the partner is significant and irreplaceable. However, this partnership is often neither exclusive nor enduring in school settings. In most educational contexts, students encounter different teachers each academic year, and shared classrooms diminish the exclusivity of teacher-student interactions, especially in secondary education. Additionally, parents typically invest more emotional depth in their relationships with children compared to teachers (Hamilton & Howes, 1992). While teacher-student interactions may not qualify as fully-fledged attachment bonds for most young individuals, it's important to recognise the nuanced nature of these relationships.

Teachers' relationships with students significantly impact learning and emotional development in education. Strong teacher-student bonds can form even when students have insecure attachments, as explained by Bergin and Bergin (2009): *"If teachers can behave in ways that disconfirm the insecure child's internal working models, then a secure relationship can develop between teacher and child"* (p. 155). This highlights teachers' potential to influence students' attachment working models and the success of relationships.

Research has investigated insecure bonds between educators and students, revealing instances where students experience discomfort in the presence of their teachers, which can impede their learning capabilities or lead to emotional and behavioural resistance. This is shown by Moullin’s et al. (2014) research, which found people with 'insecure attachments' experience difficulties with learning a language, completing schoolwork, and participating in social activities.

Recognition of AT in relation to STR is systemic, with Levy et al. (2012) reporting that Bowlby's psychoanalytic AT has become interdisciplinary, influencing educational systems widely. For example, schools and Educational Psychology Services (EPS) in the UK have adopted relational behaviour policies that focus on relationships rather than behaviourist approaches. These policies are shaped by theoretical perspectives like AT, which emphasise secure therapeutic relationships for individuals with difficult early life experiences (Parker et al., 2016). In contrast, Webster and Knotek (2007) note that AT's application to psychology-based practices within educational institutions has been limited.

The theory of attachment has faced criticism, especially in an educational context. Doyle and Cicchetti's (2017) study suggests that early insecure attachment qualities may not predict insecurity with secondary attachment figures like teachers. Smith et al. (2017) raise concerns about AT's empirical validity, with some attributing the lack of empirical support to methodological restrictions rather than inherent theory flaws. Critics argue AT is overly deterministic (Duschinsky et al., 2015), overlooking the complexity of human connections and individual agency's influence on attachment styles (Main et al., 2011). School-based attachment training may be criticised for emphasising the child's attachment type over the educators’, overlooking the STR dyad, and promoting a 'within-child' perspective.

AT is also criticised for its Westernised cultural perspective, neglecting diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds in UK schools. Moreover, its applicability in describing student-teacher dynamics may be limited, as teachers in this setting may only function as *“ad hoc attachment figures”* (Zajac & Kobak, 2006, p. 59).

### Sociocultural theory

As Vygotsky and Cole's (1978) work demonstrates, the idea that learning is a social process has received widespread acceptance in academic literature (Newman and Latifi, 2021). Giles et al. (2012) proposed that because learning is, by its very nature, a social process, relationships are fundamentally important to the educational experience. The sociocultural learning theory developed by Vygotsky and Cole (1978) centres on the notion that social contact is essential to learning and the source of society and culture. According to the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) idea, learning occurs when a student and teacher collaborate and scaffold each other's learning. The ZPD is the region where social interaction can promote cognitive development (Briner, 1999).

Vygotsky proposed that learning happens first through social contact (inter-psychological learning) and subsequently through mental structures (intra-psychological learning). According to Vygotsky's theory, social interaction has a significant impact on cognitive development and engagement with people who have more knowledge and experience, which facilitates learning. Vygotsky emphasises, *"All higher functions have their roots in genuine relationships between people"* (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57), which demonstrates the significance of establishing a conducive and cooperative relationship between students and teachers.

### Humanist principles

Carl Rogers (1951, 1979), a humanistic, person-centred approach advocate, recommends teachers act as learning facilitators, fostering a caring environment. A student-teacher partnership should embody empathy, understanding, warmth, and sincerity, yielding positive outcomes. Rogers suggests teachers see the world through their students' eyes, promoting diversity and individual culture (Rogers, 1969).

Scholarly discourse emphasises facilitating students' adjustment in the educational environment, especially those considered 'at risk,' through humanistic teacher-student interactions (Fitzsimmons et al., 2019). Humanistic values of honesty, justice, care, and respect, as discussed by Loe (2017), strengthen relationships in schools. Prioritising interpersonal connections to promote personal and academic progress aligns with a humanistic perspective. Carroll & Hurry (2018) evaluate research on STR, noting the significance of non-coercive, humanistic methods and emphasising trust and respect.

One notable critic of humanistic psychology is Jerome Kagan, a prominent psychologist known for his work on child development (Kagan, 1984). While Kagan's critiques aren't solely focused on STR, I propose they could encompass aspects of humanistic psychology that can apply to educational contexts. Kagan has criticised humanistic psychology, particularly its emphasis on self-esteem and unconditional positive regard (Kagan, 1984). He argues that the emphasis on self-esteem as a central factor in learning and well-being might oversimplify the complexities of human motivation and development.

Kagan states that self-esteem is not the sole predictor of success and that it doesn't adequately capture the multifaceted nature of human behaviour and learning. In the context of STR, Kagan's critique could be seen as challenging the notion that unconditional positive regard and constant validation are the most effective ways to foster learning and emotional growth. There is an argument that a more balanced approach that considers a variety of motivations, emotions, and developmental factors is needed. Kagan's criticism encourages a nuanced perspective that recognises the diversity of individual experiences and the complex interplay of various factors in STR, rather than solely relying on the principles of humanistic psychology (Kagan, 1984).

### Gergen’s relational theory

Gergen's relational theory (2009) contributes to social constructionist understandings of STR by highlighting the centrality of the relational process. Gergen argues that inherent to human nature is our ‘relational essence’, asserting that interactions play a vital role in shaping all facets of the human experience (Wortham and Jackson, 2012). According to Gergen, *"all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship"* (Gergen, 2009 xv). Fundamentally, Gergen considers us all to be ‘relational beings,’ and ‘relational processes’ lie at the heart of our being, forming our many ontological viewpoints.

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This perspective aligns with Wortham and Jackson's (2012) assertion that teaching should be viewed as a relational act, where teachers play a critical role in shaping how children learn, encompassing relational practices, habits, and emotions. Gergen's theory advocates for promoting connections in education rather than prioritising the development of an independent mind, emphasising teaching is inherently relational and essential for the well-being of all involved. Students are not isolated entities but rather *"individuals woven into contexts and knowledge through relations,"* viewing knowledge as contextualised and actions as diverse (Gergen, 2009, p. 10). Moreover, this viewpoint underscores the collaborative nature of learning and knowledge formation, positing that meaning and knowledge are co-constructed through coordinated actions within these connections. It implies that STR facilitates a collective process of meaning-making wherein both teachers and students actively engage. Sabol and Pianta (2012) reinforce relational theory by claiming that the process of developing positive STR primarily revolves around establishing and maintaining relationships.

To provide a critical perspective, it could be argued relational theory ignores the significant roles played by other life contexts, such as the natural world and our profound ties to historical culture. This limitation minimises the complexity of a school environment, leading some to argue that it is inadequately relational (Slife, 2004). In the context of schools, Gergen's perspective on the exclusive role of human interactions in constructing meaning could have implications for how educators approach curriculum design and student engagement. For example, critics of Gergen's perspective argue that such an exclusive focus on interpersonal interactions in the classroom might hinder students' ability to deeply connect with the subject matter (Slife and Richardson, 2011).

Gergen's (2009) notion of 'relational' resonated with my experience as a teacher and Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), as it emphasises the importance of enhancing engagement in relational processes and encourages all school staff to embrace a relational perspective of self and knowledge.

## Part 2: Theoretical Frameworks for STR

One of the prevailing ideas about STR is that relationships generate positive feelings that motivate people to perform better, thus leading to better academic performance. How educators engage with children can significantly impact their level of motivation, sense of school belongingness, academic performance, and psychosocial well-being. STR and motivation are present within three distinct theoretical frameworks, namely AT, models of social support, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). To fulfil the objectives of this thesis, I will provide an overview of SDT and Wentzel’s concept of relatedness.

### Self-determination theory and STR

Kincade et al. (2020) proposes that SDT serves as a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms behind STR and links to the positive effect on academic success and participation. Research indicates SDT proposes a constructive association between a student's feelings of autonomy, competence, and connectedness within their educational context and their propensity to participate in academic endeavours, attain improved performance results, and enjoy heightened overall well-being. Positive STR may therefore support these fundamental psychological needs and encourage students to achieve academic success.

Individuals have three primary psychological requirements, according to Deci and Ryan (2004), and one of these is relatedness, which is the need for secure relationships. According to Vansteenkiste et al. (2006, p. 3), relatedness is the emotional state characterised by "*the experience of warmth, bonding, and care... and is satisfied by connecting to and feeling significant to others*." Relationship frustration, on the other hand, is accompanied by feelings of social alienation and isolation. Thus, educators can foster a sense of inclusion among their students through the cultivation of trustworthy and compassionate connections. The development of intrinsic motivation is subject to environmental and interpersonal factors, which, within an educational setting, take place through STR.

Educators can fulfil students' social and psychological needs, like relatedness, competence, and autonomy, by being supportive partners (Stroet et al., 2015). In the context of SDT, fostering connections is vital for relatedness (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2010) suggest that meeting the need for relatedness in education can boost motivation, leading to active participation, resilience, and innovative problem-solving. Bakadorova and Raufelder (2018) support this by indicating teacher warmth and involvement can enhance motivation, engagement, and a sense of relatedness for students.

### Relatedness and STR

Wentzel (2009) is well-known for his work on the relationship between teacher engagement and students' sense of relatedness. According to Wentzel et al. (2017), 'involvement' entails expressing care for students' well-being and offering emotional support. Teachers can develop caring and constructive connections by clearly articulating behavioural requirements, being available to assist students, providing emotional support, and ensuring personal safety (Wentzel et al, 2010). Educators who engage in such practices facilitate the cultivation of a perception of affiliation and interconnectedness (Wentzel et al, 2017), thereby fostering a constructive self-concept and aspirational goals (Wentzel et al, 2017). This is reported to improve grades and test scores, peer connections, and behavioural styles (Wenzel, 2009). Additionally, important motivational aspects are improved, such as self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and academic aspirations (Wentzel, 2009).

In summary, the theories indicate the provision of social support, and the cultivation of positive relationships can exert a noteworthy influence on both academic performance and individual growth. Hence, educators must promote and enable avenues for students to establish robust and positive relationships.

## Part 3: Research on STR

### Introduction

This literature review focuses on key areas of STR research, including interactions with students, educators, and young people with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. This section examines the research on STR and its relationship with social skills, well-being, academic success, and school affiliation. It also highlights the protective role of STR and examines barriers to positive connections within secondary educational settings. While many studies have explored students' perspectives on STR, few have delved into interpretive phenomenological aspects. During this section, I will highlight when the research relates to the specific cohort and when it is related to the broader student population. This section aims to pinpoint a research gap to justify the current thesis.

### Student and teacher voice

#### Student voice of STR

Research in this section can be applied broadly to students in general. Previous research that prioritises student perspectives can be used to obtain a better knowledge of STR and the themes that are important to students, the importance of these connections, and the resulting outcomes arising from such associations. According to Cefai and Cooper (2010), there is evidence to suggest students prefer teachers who possess qualities such as warmth, concern, amiability, reliability, consistency, and support. These characteristics are also recognised as encouraging productive student-teacher interactions (Pomeroy, 1999). In addition, students are reported to want teachers to be consistent in their connections (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2010) because they want genuine connections in their complicated lives (Munford and Sanders, 2015; Sapiro and Ward, 2020).

Students seek equitable relationships, fostering belongingness and positive social interactions, which enhance academic outcomes. They desire teachers to value their opinions, actively listen, and show respect (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Academic literature highlights the importance of respectful treatment and educators' belief in students' abilities (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Jahnukainen, 2001). Furthermore, they wish for respect, fairness, and a voice to address perceived injustices (Jahnukainen, 2001).

Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) suggest an emphasis on student voice in education results in students developing an 'inner focus,' which, they argue, fosters heightened concerns and introspection rather than cultivating aspirational, resilient, and positively oriented learners. Their central concern is that while emotions have always played a role in education, they should not become the primary focus.

Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) argue educators must consider the fundamental goals of education to avoid losing sight of the true goal. Their perspective questions the balance between emotional well-being and intellectual growth in educational approaches. However, since Ecclestone and Hayes's book in 2019, substantial education reforms addressing well-being have been implemented (Department of Education (DfE), 2021). While they raise valid concerns about education's goals and therapeutic concepts, education is diverse, with varying objectives. Emotional well-being need not conflict with intellectual growth; they can complement each other by creating a safe and supportive learning environment (Kristjánsson, 2019). Therapeutic concepts, like social-emotional learning, can equip students with valuable life skills, enhancing both personal and academic growth (Gedikoglu, 2021). Thus, there is no single ‘true’ goal for education; it encompasses academic achievement, personal development, and life preparation (Gedikoglu, 2021). Therefore, balancing these goals to fit specific contexts and student needs is essential for holistic development.

#### Teacher voice of STR

Prior research often neglects students' perspectives on STR, primarily focusing on educators. Fitzsimmons (2021) explored teachers' experiences of STR in alternative provisions, utilising Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Attachment Theory (AT). Fitzsimmons findings are helpful as the study specifically addresses students with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs which aligns with the cohort in this research. The study revealed four themes: establishing connections, emotional aspects, embracing one's entirety, and dealing with disconnections. It was argued that STR have humanistic qualities that are vital for student engagement. However, educators perceive a need to improve their relationship-building skills by understanding psychodynamic and attachment theories (Fitzsimmons, 2021).

The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) is a commonly used tool for evaluating teachers' perceived relationship quality with individual students, including closeness, conflict, and reliance, according to Hamre and Pianta (2001). The STRS was created to evaluate how well a teacher gets along with a single student as well as the general quality of the relationship for the broad population of students. However, it has limitations as it primarily relies on educators' reports, and there's a need to incorporate young people's perspectives (Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

### Research on developing STR

#### Factors of positive STR

Research highlight factors influencing STR effectiveness, which can be applied broadly to students in general. According to Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004), excellent STRs are marked by minimal conflict and closeness, which fosters young people’s curiosity while also improving their emotional, cognitive, and social abilities. A key factor is a teachers' ability to balance classroom structure and student independence, impacting student ownership of education, motivation, and self-perceived competence. Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) state educators can effectively address children's social and academic needs through an inclusive and encouraging environment. Various factors, including students' gender, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, and cultural background, influence educators' teaching approaches. This is supported by Kesner (2000), who reports that teachers' self-perceptions, efficacy assessments, and expectations for students collectively shape their pedagogical methods.

According to Lloyd-Jones et al. (2010), educators' personality traits significantly influence their ability to establish trusting relationships with students. Research also links the effectiveness of STR to teachers' attachment relationship with their caregivers. Lloyd-Jones et al. (2010) examined primary school teachers' stress levels and their connections with students they classed as ‘challenging’. According to the findings, highly stressed teachers may display negative emotions, potentially leading to confrontational interactions. Conversely, according to Coie and Koeppl's (1990) research, pupils who have difficulties with attention or disruptive conduct have problematic relationships with teachers, which may lead to a severe and punitive teaching approach. When this happens, they are less inclined to bond with adults, therefore, those dissatisfied with the school environment often have less supportive teacher connections (Coie and Koeppl, 1990).

##### SEMH needs and STR

Fitzsimmons (2021) researched the STR with teachers working in a specialist SEMH provision. This research holds particular significance as it centres on students with SEMH needs, aligning closely with the cohort under examination in this thesis. The direct relevance to young people (YP) with SEMH needs enhances the connection to the primary focus of this study. The study used IPA methodology, which has only been employed in a limited number of research papers in this area. Fitzsimmons (2021, p. 20) asserts teacher attributes like *“warmth, kindness, care, calmness, understanding, reliability, consistency, supportiveness, trustworthiness and being respectful”* encourage positive STRs in students with SEMH needs. Furthermore, students stated they want to be treated with respect and to be able to communicate their concerns when mistreated. This sentiment aligns with the findings of research by Cefai and Cooper (2010), where students expressed their wish for greater involvement in decision-making processes and the chance to express their viewpoints. This desire for involvement and participation can contribute to a more positive school environment and increased motivation among students. This underscores the importance for educators to create opportunities for student input and actively listen to their perspectives. According to Pomeroy's (1999) study, students indicated a preference for a more equitable distribution of authority, and they desired STR characterised by a pastoral and humanistic approach rather than an authoritarian one. The findings highlight the need to provide an educational setting in which young people feel valued and respected. Educators must include students in participatory decision-making processes to foster a sense of ownership and accountability for their learning. Furthermore, students expressed the desire for equitable treatment, free from judgement, blame, or ridicule (Cefai & Cooper, 2010).

YP with SEMH needs seek an 'ideal STR' characterised by a caring connection where teachers know, listen, communicate, and explain. They prefer adult-like relationships emphasising pastoral support over punitive methods (Fitzsimmons, 2021). Since the focus of this research is students with SEMH needs, the findings by Fitzsimmons (2021) are especially relevant to the cohort that this thesis is examining. Browne's (2013) research correlates students' confidence with positive STR, echoing humanistic educational principles valuing compassion and individuality. Students desire recognition as whole individuals, underscoring the significance of a friendly and inclusive learning atmosphere that fosters growth and self-discovery (Kazanjian & Choi, 2016). These findings are applicable broadly to all students and acknowledge teachers' roles as facilitators of this process, not just knowledge transmitters (Kazanjian & Choi, 2016).

Students with SEMH needs are reported to appreciate teachers who understand their challenges, empathise without judgement, and may relate through personal experiences. Studies show students enjoy authentic teacher interactions and sharing common interests, enhancing connections and fostering a positive learning environment (Sapiro & Ward, 2020). Munford and Sanders (2015) and Sapiro and Ward (2020) conducted research that underscores the value of authentic connections addressing students' needs over utilitarian relationships. Emphasising genuineness, as advocated by Miller and Stiver (1997), suggests teachers should focus on building real connections, offering relevant and engaging content to create a positive learning environment, and recognising and meeting each student's unique needs to support academic success.

##### Relationships in secondary school

During secondary school, students undergo significant changes in their lives. They are exposed to new environments, people, and experiences that can be overwhelming. During this period, studies that can be applied broadly to students, in general, suggest a reduction in the quality of connections between students and their teachers, particularly as students enter secondary school and progress through the academic year, as highlighted by research conducted by Ciarrochi et al. (2017). This is supported by Bayram Özdemir et al. (2019), who conducted research revealing unfavourable attitudes towards STR tend to become entrenched over time during secondary school. After transitioning to secondary school, research suggests a tendency for a deterioration in the standard of relationships, the amount of student participation, and academic accomplishment. As a result, the significance of student-teacher connections becomes even more vital (Hughes & Cao, 2018). Hence, educators need to prioritise constructing significant bonds with their students throughout secondary school. By doing so, they can help mitigate the negative effects of this transitional period and set their students up for success both academically and personally.

##### Teacher training and STR

The establishment of robust social and emotional skills in students is commonly recognised to hinge on the teacher's proficiency in attending to their social, emotional, and behavioural needs (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2010). This research is relevant to the cohort within this study as they are identified as having SEMH needs, and thus may require additional provision for social, emotional and behavioural support. This suggests teachers should develop their skills as practitioners to holistically support YP, and therefore this should be recognised as part of a teacher's role and during teacher training. Despite this recognition of the importance of the teacher's role, Hagenauer et al. (2015) have suggested the lack of concentration on relationships among teachers can be attributed to their emphasis on curriculum and assessment during their training. Additionally, according to Alvarez-Hevia (2018) and Maher and Fitzgerald (2020), the training initially offered to educators lacks sufficiency in equipping them to effectively cultivate productive connections with their students.

As per the ‘Teachers' Standards’ (DfE, 2013), it is imperative for educators to foster good connections with their students, albeit within the framework of managing their conduct. The guidance document addressed the topic of STR as the seventh point on an eight-point list (DfE, 2013). However, this order of priority may not align with the findings of the aforementioned studies and fails to recognise how STR underpins the educational experience for YP.

The Education Inspection Framework by Ofsted (2019) emphasises the significance of establishing constructive and courteous relationships. It is recommended educational leaders provide supplementary instruction and resources to teachers to create and maintain positive relationships with their students (Ofsted, 2019).

This may involve mentoring teachers on how to cultivate and regulate productive relationships with students who exhibit challenging behaviour or are more susceptible to unfavourable consequences (Williford et al., 2017). Teachers who are aware of their obligations and consciously focus on developing positive relationships with students create learning environments that encourage educational, interpersonal, and emotional development (Reeves and Le Mare, 2017).

#### Research on the impact of STR

##### Importance and impact of STR

The literature in this section can be applied broadly to students in general and suggests positive STR can be associated with favourable outcomes for both teachers and YP (Claessens et al., 2017). According to Williford et al. (2017), the STR's dyadic character means that it is dependent on and required for positive results in a variety of areas, including academics, social relationships, emotional well-being, and behavioural patterns. According to Hattie (2009), the impact of the STR on the social and academic achievements of typically-developing YP has been extensively investigated. Research has demonstrated establishing effective connections between students and teachers can yield positive outcomes. Cornelius-White (2007) carried out a systematic review of studies focused on analysing the success of learner-centred interactions in schools. The study's findings showed the students reaped numerous advantages, including heightened engagement, refined analytical skills, elevated levels of contentment, improved mathematical proficiency, better academic performance, improved attendance, reduced disruptive behaviour, heightened motivation, improved social connections, and increased self-esteem and perceived achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007). According to Cornelius-White's research, the utilisation of humanistic and person-centred methodologies, including empathy, warmth, and collaboration, can result in strong STR.

##### Academic outcomes

An increasing body of empirical research which can be applied broadly to students, in general, suggests cultivating favourable STR can result in several advantages in the educational environment. Additionally, research has demonstrated fostering interpersonal relationships within academic institutions can positively impact academic performance (Peterson & Bonell, 2018). In their research, Bergin and Bergin (2009) identified a favourable association between the calibre of teacher-student interactions, characterised by a sense of security and motivation, and a reduction in behavioural challenges alongside enhanced academic accomplishments.

Positive teacher-student interactions significantly impact student behaviour, involvement, and academic success, according to Sabol and Pianta (2012). Roorda et al. (2017) also found a link between positive STR and improved academic achievement, and student involvement. This is supported by Wentzel et al. (2017), who identified a strong correlation between students' goal orientations, academic efforts, and STR. Furthermore, according to Diaz et al. (2017), connections between teachers and students in the educational environment are significant determinants of academic accomplishment (Lippard et al., 2018).

##### Impact of STR on social, emotional, and psychological adjustment

A previous study has underlined the significance of positive STR in fostering the emotional and social growth of students (Heatly & Votruba-Drzal, 2017). This research stands out for its specific focus on emotional and social growth, aligning with the importance of the cohort with SEMH needs as the focus participant group in this thesis. Roorda et al. (2011) reported that the strength of the link between STR and behavioural engagement is stronger in secondary school students when compared to primary school children. According to Shreeve et al. (2002), the effectiveness of the STR in motivating students and managing behaviour surpasses that of formal behaviour systems. This assertion is supported by feedback from students, as reported by Mansfield (2007) and Shreeve et al. (2002).

A wealth of research shows characteristics of STR, such as sensitivity, responsiveness, warmth, and perspective-taking, influence children's development of these skills through day-to-day interactions. These results support the idea that interactions and relationships between adults and children are crucial proximal processes that add up to shape development across time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, educators must prioritise creating good connections with YP to promote their overall well-being and emotional and social development. These connections can lay the groundwork for children's future success in a variety of aspects of life.

Roorda et al. (2011) have described the affective, or emotional, components of STRs. The importance of warmth and empathy in STR is emphasised, as it has been found that these traits are linked to social competence. According to Tayler (2015), the establishment of interpersonal connections within the school environment can facilitate the restructuring of relationships and foster resilience. The statement underscores the significance of social relationships beyond the domestic setting, particularly in educational institutions, where engagements with social peers and educators can promote positive conduct as well as academic and affective wellness (Tayler, 2015).

Further support from Kennedy and Kennedy (2004) suggests the STR can develop into a bond that bears resemblance to that of a primary caregiver and a child, owing to the emotional and physical proximity between them. The establishment of this bond possesses the capability to furnish children with a sense of assurance and safeguard them from psychological strain. Moreover, positive STR has also been linked to improved emotional and social adjustment in YP (Breeman et al., 2015), enhanced resilience (Yu et al., 2018), and a sense of well-being (Moore et al., 2018). The above-mentioned studies indicate implementing relational strategies can cultivate a favourable educational atmosphere, underscoring the significance of positive interpersonal exchanges in advancing social and emotional development and thereby enhancing academic performance.

##### Barriers to STR

Several challenges need to be addressed before establishing effective relationships between students and teachers can be accomplished. Previous research that can be applied broadly to students in general suggests that characteristics like ethnic origin, gender, and socioeconomic status impact variances in the quality of STR. Specifically, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, males, or people of colour are more susceptible to having poor relationships with their teachers, according to Hughes et al. (2005) research. Roorda et al. (2011), and Hajovsky et al. (2021). Despite this, empirical data suggests these cohorts can derive significant advantages from robust STR (Winding & Andersen, 2015).

Although STRs have a crucial function in advancing school inclusion, obstacles have been recognised in the execution and maintenance of these approaches. Institutional limitations are among the obstacles that prevent the development of productive interactions between students and teachers, such as rigid behaviour management policies, as well as interpersonal factors, such as teachers' perceptions of students' behaviour (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Additional challenges due to budgetary limitations and a heightened emphasis on academic performance mean educators are currently facing reduced opportunities and resources to cultivate positive relationships with students (Chowa et al.,2013).

## Part 4: Research Justification

Cornelius-White (2007) carried out a systematic review of correlational research to examine the influence of teacher characteristics on pupils. The findings highlighted non-directivity, empathy, and warmth as the most influential teacher variables. According to Johnson and Johnson (2008), actions like being available and showing empathy significantly influence students. These findings emphasise the need for further qualitative research on students' experiences of STR.

It is critical to note that the method by which student voices of STR are gathered in research has an epistemological perspective. The notion of ‘epistemological oppression’ is significant because it has influence over meaning-making and knowledge construction in this area (Sewell, 2016). The absence of research on students' voices could be considered as ‘epistemological oppression’ because there is a focus on teachers' impressions of STR without a balance of student perspectives. Even when YP has been the subject of research, there has been a lack of focus on their lived experiences, making it difficult to examine phenomena as their views are presented by separating them from their context (Halliday, 1973). This study will focus on the use of IPA, which is stated to assist me in getting ‘closer’ to the students’ experiences (Larkin et al., 2006), which allows me to get closer to their ‘lifeworld’ (Carpenter, 2009).

Prior studies have attempted to examine the complexity of STR using simple methodologies that fail to take into consideration the complexities of such relationships as YP experiences them. As previous research has predominantly concentrated on educators' viewpoints, there exists a notable gap in the academic discourse that centres on the perspectives of students regarding their experiences of STR. Holder (2022) studied teachers' opinions on STR in an alternative setting, and Sharrad et al. (2022) utilised IPA to examine the experiences of STR for primary school teachers. Fitzsimmons (2021) used IPA to concentrate on the rupture and repair of relationships in STR from the viewpoint of teachers in alternative provisions.

The experiences of students in mainstream secondary schools, however, are less well understood, as much of the focus of STR is based on the experiences of teachers or support staff (Holder, 2022; Fitzsimmons et al., 2019). The most current study in this field, by Cramond (2021), uses IPA to examine teachers' and adolescents' perceptions of positive STR in secondary education. However, it could be argued Cramond (2021) did not choose a homogeneous group because the subject is being investigated from distinct viewpoints, those of teacher and student.

Moreover, the primary emphasis of this study is on the overall experience of STR rather than solely on the positives of the relationships, as done in Cramond’s (2021) research.

The purpose of this research is to gather empirical information to answer the research question*, ‘What are the lived experiences of the STR for* YP *attending mainstream secondary school?’* Rather than predefined features, the major focus of the study is on evaluating the *"quality and texture of experience"* (Willig, 2013, p. 8) and the meanings attributed to experiences. The area of STR holds significant value for the Educational Psychology Doctorate programme as it enables Educational Psychologists (EPs) to collaborate with educational institutions to gain insights into the formation and fundamental characteristics of STR. Additionally, EPs can advocate for the positive correlation between favourable STR and beneficial outcomes, as supported by Cornelius-White (2007) and Roffey (2013). EPs have the potential to empower YP to share their experiences of STR, as suggested by Todd (2007). By amplifying the experiences and narratives of young individuals regarding their interactions with educators, EPs can facilitate the transformation by acting as catalysts for change in this domain (Hardy & Hobbs, 2017; Todd, 2007).

### Literature review conclusion

Some of the key theoretical approaches to STR have been critically examined in this literature review. It has also emphasised the need for additional research to obtain a more thorough knowledge of this complicated phenomenon by highlighting some of the difficulties and limitations of these results. Academic research about STR has identified a variety of favourable consequences for students. The favourable consequences encompass enhanced academic performance, heightened drive and involvement, and greater socio-emotional growth. Nonetheless, the study emphasises the need to consider factors that exist in the context of these relationships, such as cultural gaps and power imbalances. Despite evidence showing the importance of STR in fostering student functioning, limited knowledge exists regarding the optimal strategies for cultivating these connections from the perspective of YP, particularly in the context of secondary education.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Part 1

### Introduction

This section demonstrates how the study objectives influenced my decision to use Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a methodology. It demonstrates the foundational ontological and epistemological aspects of my research, introduces crucial IPA concepts, and explores their implications for the study. The chapter also covers the three philosophical branches—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography—that underpin IPA. Subsequently, it addresses concerns about the research's quality, rigour, and reliability. The chapter finishes with an overview, including sampling, recruiting, and data collection, and following that, an overview of transcribing and the IPA method.

### Phenomenological ontological and epistemological position

This research is consistent with a phenomenological position both ontologically and epistemologically, as well as aligning with the research objectives. I spent a significant amount of time grappling with my ontological and epistemological viewpoint, and some of my reflections are described in reflective log 4 in Appendix 1.

Ontology is frequently illustrated as a continuum that stretches between two fundamental philosophical viewpoints in research (Robson, 2002). One of these perspectives, known as the positivist or realist paradigm, establishes an epistemological foundation for research by affirming the existence of overarching principles that govern human behaviour. Kornuta and Germaine (2019) argue that like the realm of the physical world, individuals possess the capacity to perceive these truths and develop methodologies to examine and scrutinise them. Realist ontology recognises the existence of a tangible, objective ‘reality’, presupposing that something exists and can be explored and defined through empirical inquiry (McEvoy & Richards, 2003).

At one end of the continuum, there are relativist viewpoints, which, in their most radical manifestation, contend that our understanding of reality is solely influenced by our human awareness, making it inaccessible to anyone except the individual (Robson, 2002). However, relativism claims that ‘reality’ is a subjective feature of human experience that contains *“as many different realities as there are people*" (Levers, 2013, p. 2).

Quantitative research methodologies are often compatible with using measurements and data to investigate a given issue. This perspective, also known as naive realism, asserts that researchers can conduct impartial investigations on human subjects and draw conclusions about them. Kornuta and Germaine (2019) propose the interpretation of experience is inherently subjective and contingent upon the person’s contextual understanding, precluding true objectivity. This epistemological perspective is better suited to qualitative research approaches, which often explore the domain of human experiences, the interpretation of events, and providing explanations without claiming to provide definitive answers or absolute truths (Willig, 2013).

Phenomenological techniques in qualitative research fall between realism and relativist epistemologies, according to Willig (2013). Willig (2013) defines interpretive phenomenological research as exploring and reflecting on an individual’s encounters within a social, cultural, or psychological context.

The study of knowledge, including what constitutes knowledge and whether or not it can be obtained, is referred to as epistemology (Willig, 2008). In this research study, I employ a phenomenological method, which means I start from the premise that an individual's experience is genuine for that person, but it is also subject to interpretation and reinterpretation by both the person experiencing it and other people. In agreement with Ponterotto's (2005) approach, I believe knowledge is essentially subjective and is situated inside the created reality of one's own experiences. Participants in this study participated in a continuous process of sense-making (meaning) of their experiences by sharing their unique encounters and experiences from a subjective standpoint.

### Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Larkin et al. (2021) provide an overview of several of the most influential philosophers in phenomenology's history. In this section, I will examine three of these philosophers' ideas around phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics.

Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, 2011) constitute the three foundational philosophical elements of IPA that I will explore in the context of my research. My examination of IPA led me to Larkin et al.'s (2021) interpretation of phenomenology, which highlights how our experiences are shaped by our bodies, emotions, and cognitive processes. Husserl, a philosopher and physicist, initially emphasised the importance of phenomenological inquiry, which involves an exploration of an individual's experiences. The basic goal of IPA is to examine how people acquire meaning from their life experiences and interpret those events in a variety of ways. This approach seeks to comprehensively delve into participants' experiences while transparently conveying my perspectives and understanding (Smith, 2011). As noted by Wagstaff and Williams (2014) and Mertens (2015), IPA prioritises the participant's role in the research process, providing a framework for expressing and comprehending specific phenomena.

### Phenomenology

Rather than being a methodology, phenomenology is a school of thought influenced over time by numerous thinkers. Phenomenology emerged in the 20th century with contributions from figures like Heidegger (1962), Husserl (1927), Sartre (1943), and Merleau-Ponty and Smith (1962). Unlike the dominant positivist viewpoints of the period, which valued scientific and objective knowledge, phenomenology evolved as a theoretical framework emphasising the subjective perception of lived events (Smith, 2011).

Husserl (1927) proposed a phenomenological framework to examine the concept of 'attitude' using intentionality and reflexivity to explore the core essence of human experiences. This required 'letting go' of preconceived notions and beliefs, directing attention to the fundamental subjective experience of the phenomena under consideration. He introduced a technique called 'bracketing' to achieve this (Husserl, 1927), promoting a deeper, unbiased exploration of participants' experiences. In the context of IPA, Heidegger's critique might emphasise the limitations of solely emphasising individual consciousness and argue for a more contextual, existential, and hermeneutic approach. Heidegger's perspective suggests exploring how human existence and the surrounding world shape experiences, delving into the every day and the interpretive aspects of participants' narratives in a broader, more holistic manner. Smith (2011) identifies prior knowledge, assumptions, and preconceptions as ongoing interpretive 'obstacles' in IPA research. In contrast, Heidegger and Gadamer's approach challenges the concept of 'bracketing,' which involves isolating a researcher's personal experiences from the analysis. Instead, they suggest a researcher's knowledge and assumptions should be integrated into the data interpretation process (Larkin et al., 2006).

Sartre's existential phenomenology presented the idea people continually shift because of their experiences, describing them as *"constantly evolving*" (Kierkegaard, 1974, p. 79). Sartre proposed the self as a fluid process of existence within relationships and explored the notion of 'nothingness' and its impact on our perception (Sartre, 1943). Sartre's approach underscores the role of interpretation in IPA and its connection to creating meaning.

According to IPA principles, each person's contact results in a multitude of different realities linked to the 'same' phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006). Consequently, phenomenology prioritises personal experiences over the pursuit of generalised worldly knowledge (Willig, 2000). The objective is to delve into the distinctive personal and common experiences of the participants. The IPA research approach is rooted in phenomenology, which permits the exploration of the individualised process of creating meaning (Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and how individuals ascribe significance to a specific phenomenon (Hood, 2016). Thus, the emphasis lies more on 'how' an experience is perceived by the individual than what we may already assume about it.

### Idiography

The idiographic method, defined as an attempt to comprehend *"the particular"* (Smith, 2011, p. 29), constitutes the second fundamental tenet of IPA. In the context of IPA research, each person is expected to *“offer a personally unique perspective on their relationship to, or involvement in, various phenomena of interest*.*"* (Smith, 2011, p. 29). IPA is deemed idiographic because its participants are regarded as unique individuals who are invited to share their experiences situated within specific contexts and time frames. This necessitates a thorough exploration of each participant's experience, with a concentrated focus on the *“particular”* (Larkin et al., 2021, p. 26).

However, it's essential to recognise this emphasis on uniqueness in the process of identifying themes across all participants. The aim is to illuminate how diverse individuals experience a particular event, echoing Warnock's notion that *"going deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal"* (Smith, 2004, p. 42, citing Warnock, 1975). This emphasis on an in-depth examination of the characteristics of idiography contributes to current research by offering a comprehensive view of a phenomenon that might not be universally applicable but provides valuable insights into the broader landscape.

Every individual experience is considered unique to a certain cultural and chronological context and cannot be easily generalised to a larger population (Smith, 2011). As a result, in this study, I avoid generalising and presenting participants' experiences as absolute 'truths,' instead attempting to examine and understand the experiences they revealed throughout the interviews (Smith, 2011). IPA emphasises idiography and people's 'lifeworld' (Brooks, 2015), allowing for a full understanding of how individuals perceive the analysed event (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This study centres on the examination of participants' experiences with Student-Teacher Relationships (STR) within the context of their education. Ideography becomes pivotal for comprehending these experiences.

I hold the belief that concentrating on a comprehensive, in-depth, and holistic perspective of students' experiences can contribute to deeper comprehension and enrich the discourse surrounding the significance of relationships in secondary schools. Idiography assisted me in examining each participant's experience within their specific context (Larkin et al., 2021), while maintaining an openness to the notion that individuals encountering similar events may perceive them differently (Miller et al., 2018).

### Hermeneutics

The significance of interpretation (hermeneutics) in examining experiences forms the third fundamental feature of IPA. IPA's theoretical framework hinges on the processes of interpretation and meaning construction that take place when an individual encounters a phenomenon. Hermeneutics has been advanced by notable scholars like Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1991), and Ricoeur (1981). Heidegger, a prominent advocate of phenomenology, emphasised the significance of interpretation in the field, arguing that understanding is fundamentally intertwined with the process of interpretation (Langdridge, 2007). According to Horrigan-Kelly et al. (2016), Heidegger argued that the self is an inseparable component of the universe and cannot be dissociated from it. *"Inter-relationship and interconnectedness*" are frequently viewed as important to the "*human experience"* (Tuffour, 2017, p. 3). As a result, I am compelled to employ hermeneutics, a method of interpretation, to investigate and seek to derive meaning from the phenomena under inquiry, as suggested by this conclusion.

The process of evaluating data necessitates a double hermeneutic approach, which I acknowledge as an academic researcher. This technique aims to go beyond the surface-level interpretation of the data and instead uncover a more profound and meaningful understanding (Finlay, 2011). Smith (2011) references a researcher's interpretative process as a 'hermeneutic circle,' a reflective and dynamic process. The 'double hermeneutic,' an important feature of IPA, defines how the interpreter understands the participants' sense-making process. Furthermore, IPA's non-linear cycle of interpretation should not be overlooked because, on several levels, it alternates between the part and the whole. IPA asserts that comprehending the whole necessitates understanding the parts, and vice versa. Consequently, I employed an iterative approach throughout the investigation (Larkin et al., 2021). Using IPA meant that I was attempting to understand how the participant attempted to make sense of their experience, which is where the concept of the double hermeneutic comes into play. I aimed to unravel the 'sense-making' engaged in by the participant. Every individual's response depended on their unique interpretations and life experiences, a facet I recognised during this research. This study effectively demonstrates both the *"double hermeneutic"* (Willig, 2013, p. 87) and the iterative method.

Before embarking on cross-case analysis, I implemented a well-defined systematic analysis approach that focused on each interview transcript. The analysis process is elucidated using tables that depict the interpretive path taken, accompanied by illustrative quotes at each level that maintain a close linkage with the transcript.

Throughout the analysis process, as suggested by Hood (2016), I engaged with the data as I progressed through the stages. I integrated supplementary reflexive methods, including the upkeep of research journals and seeking guidance through supervision to demonstrate how I acknowledged and employed my *"preconceptions and assumptions,"* as well as my efforts to *"unpack the meanings within"* (Flowers and Larkin, 1997, p. 189). Throughout the research, I share a commonality with the participant in the sense that both of us assign meaning to various aspects; nonetheless, my access to their experience is limited to how it is narrated and construed (Tindall, 2009).

Pre-existing knowledge, assumptions, and preconceptions are deemed ongoing and interpretive *"obstacles"* during IPA research (Smith, 2011, p. 25). The ideologies of Heidegger and Gadamer oppose ‘bracketing,’ or totally separating out, a researcher's personal experiences and perceptions from the facts they are analysing. Rather, they propose the knowledge and presumptions of a researcher be incorporated into the data interpretation process (Larkin et al., 2006). To counteract this influence, I adopted an open-minded and reflexive stance, consciously monitoring for biases. This approach allowed the text to reveal its distinctiveness and *"assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings”* (Gadamer, 1991, p. 269).

### Quality issues and generalisability

Qualitative research involves the adoption of an interpretative attitude, which unavoidably introduces a certain degree of subjectivity into the research process. According to Willig (2012), interpretive research should use caution when drawing firm conclusions because it “can never do more than shed light on one small part of a much bigger whole”(p. 57). Making claims of representation and generalisation within the context of the research's epistemological base becomes difficult given the small sample size and the inherent subjectivity of interpretation.

This qualitative study is based on the premise that our experiences and perceptions shape our understanding of the world and our interactions with others. The traditional emphasis on dependability, internal and external validity, and criteria for assessing research quality and rigour may be questioned because it aligns with a positivist perspective that assumes the existence of an objective, unchanging reality subject to objective observation and evaluation. Thus, the conventional definitions of reliability, objectivity, and generalisability applied to quantitative research may not align with the epistemological stance of IPA. However, Yardley (2015) recognises the need to confirm the quality of qualitative research by employing principles for demonstrating excellence in qualitative research which are outlined in the next paragraph.

According to Yardley's standards (2000; 2015), the ‘evaluation of quality in qualitative research’ is guided by four essential concepts*: "sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance"* (p. 224). This research addresses the validity of these criteria, outlining the steps taken to fulfil these four benchmarks.

Sensitivity to context entails being aware of applicable studies, philosophy, theories, and literature, as well as the socioeconomic, historical, and social environment's possible effect on participant answers and analysis. I maintained a reflective stance throughout the research journey through both supervision and reflective questions (see Appendix 2). My familiarity with existing literature and focus on relational dynamics in interviews demonstrated sensitivity to context.

To demonstrate commitment and rigour, I thoroughly reviewed pertinent literature, collected accurate data, and actively participated in data analysis. A professional approach to data gathering, analysis, findings, and discussion was consistently maintained. Extensive reading on STR, phenomenological approaches, and IPA occurred before commencing the research. Analysis and findings drew from both psychological knowledge and practical insights from current and past roles.

Transparency was preserved by providing a clear depiction of the execution of each stage of the study, while coherence was secured by aligning the selected method with the research. To ensure transparency and coherence throughout the research process, I diligently and meticulously recorded each step, ensuring the information was easily accessible and understandable. The data gathering and analysis procedures were broken down openly and honestly, and all results are grounded in the data.

I effectively used supervision spaces, benefiting from the guidance of both my university research supervisor and fieldwork supervisor. My analysis and findings were reported systematically and transparently, ensuring my work remained coherent and that all claims were substantiated by the data.

The research showcased its impact and importance by contributing something innovative and valuable within a field with clear implications for professional practice. The research topic, focusing on the experiences of students’ relationships with teachers, was particularly relevant to the practice of Educational Psychologists (EPs) and those involved in education. By opting for a research methodology that sought to delve deeply into the experiences of a select number of students, I aimed to shed light on their unique perspectives and consider what insights educational practitioners could glean from these experiences.

### Ethics

The research conducted adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021), as detailed in Appendices 3 and 4. Furthermore, it obtained ethical clearance from the University of Sheffield's ethics committee in July 2022. Throughout the research process, I consistently maintained the ethical standards outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018), with a commitment to upholding the principles of *"respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity"* (p. 5). As per Tracy's (2010) guidance, the research procedures were rooted in the principles of respect and trust to ensure the attainment of informed consent, the safeguarding of confidentiality, and the prevention of any potential harm.

To ensure participants and their parents comprehended the research, I developed information sheets that succinctly and clearly outlined the research objectives and methodology using accessible language tailored for Young People (YP) (refer to Appendices 5, 6, and 7). All information forms provided to parents, carers, and students emphasised their right to withdraw from the research at any point. As the participants were under 18 years old, parental consent was mandatory. Parents and carers were required to provide consent before student participants were provided with the information and consent forms. Both parental and student participant consent was essential for participation in the research. Throughout the recruitment process, I collaborated closely with the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) to ensure potential participants could access and comprehend the information sheet and consent forms and that school staff support was available when needed. Furthermore, before the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to ask additional questions if desired, and they were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point.

During the interviews with the students, preventing potential psychological harm, distress, or discomfort was taken into consideration. Given the research's focus, sensitive topics could arise during the interviews. As a precaution, a well-known staff member at the school was designated to provide emotional and well-being support to student participants following the interviews if needed. To protect anonymity and minimise the likelihood of identifying participants based on their comments, pseudonyms were assigned to participants. The school and teachers were also assigned pseudonyms during the transcription of the data to avoid potential identification. To mitigate potential harm during the interviews, I closely observed participants' body language and reactions, reassured them of the ability to pause or terminate the interview if necessary, and maintained a semi-structured interview format to provide the participants with an amount of control throughout the interview.

Aligned with the ethical principles articulated by Willig (2013), this research adhered to five pivotal ethical considerations. Firstly, participants and their parents received comprehensive information about the research process through informational materials, and explicit consent was obtained through consent forms. Secondly, the study was conducted transparently, with clear communication about the research objectives and the utilisation of the collected information. Thirdly, participants were assured they could withdraw from the study without consequence. Following data collection, participants were informed of the research objectives and provided input on findings, and their feedback guided the dissemination of study findings. Finally, rigorous procedures were followed to protect participants' data and information throughout the research. Kvale & Brinkmann's (2009, p. 263) assertion that *"human interaction in qualitative inquiries affects researchers and participants, and the knowledge produced through qualitative research affects our understanding of the human condition"* served as a reminder of the prevalence of ethical concerns in qualitative research. Therefore, I recognised the need for careful consideration when conducting research with students within a formal educational context.

## Part 2: Procedure and design

The sampling, recruiting, and data collection techniques will be described in this chapter. It will conclude by describing the transcription and analysis methodology.

### Sample

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) uses purposeful and homogeneous sampling to understand individual experiences rather than a broad population range. Results can reflect one person's or a homogenous group's viewpoint on a specific topic (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Participants, viewed as 'experts' on the phenomenon, are chosen for their insightful information (Smith et al., 2009). It is recommended that those starting out in research focus on closely homogenous groups and related themes (Smith, 2011).

I began recruitment by emailing secondary schools within a one-hour radius for interview convenience. The email outlined the research and inclusion criteria. A brief personal biography (Appendix 11) was included with my university email address. One school expressed interest and wanted the research findings to be disseminated to the school leadership team, aligning with the 'impact and importance' criteria (Yardley, 2015).

All participants were from the same secondary school, in years 9 or 10, on the school Special Educational Needs (SEN) register for Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs as per the guidelines set forth by the Department for Education and Department of Health (DfE/DoH, 2015) and receiving 'additional or different' support in school for behaviour, as defined by the DfE and DoH (2015).

The choice of a single school was advantageous for obtaining a homogenous sample (Ponterotto, 2005).

### Inclusion criteria

This study targeted mainstream secondary school students, specifically those in either year 9 or year 10, encompassing both male and female participants. The focus was on students on the school’s SEN register for SEMH needs as per the guidelines set forth by the Department for Education and Department of Health (DfE/DoH, 2015) and receiving 'additional or different' support in school for behaviour, as defined by the DfE and DoH (2015). The selection of participants based on this terminology allowed for flexibility, as the criteria might vary from one school to another. To ensure consistency, all participants attended the same school, where 'additional or different' support for behaviour was documented. This was documented by SEN provision mapping as part of the school's SEN monitoring, outlined within the school SEN policy.

I felt a notable tension when trying to identify a homogeneous group during this research as the term SEMH is broad and can vary across school settings. I spent a large around of time considering alternative terms and considering the ethical implications of using the term SEMH. At times I felt uncomfortable with the idea of labelling and categorising the YP involved in the research so also considered this from a critical position, which is also refer to in chapter 5 when I reflect on my use of IPA. While adopting a critical psychology perspective raises valid concerns about the ambiguity and subjectivity associated with the SEMH label (Norwich & Eaton, 2015), as well as the potential for students to be perceived as 'other' or 'different' (Oliver, 2013), pragmatic considerations support its retention. The term is integral to the SEN discourse within educational settings (Penketh, 2014) and is commonly employed in research studies. Retaining the SEMH label facilitates the development of strategies aimed at supporting these students, aiding Educational Psychologists (EPs) in their efforts. This not only assists EPs in enhancing their own work but also contributes to a broader framework for supporting students with SEMH needs, promoting best practices in line with recommendations from scholars such as Carroll and Hurry (2018).

It's essential to critically examine the term 'additional or different' provision and provide a rationale for its use in this thesis. This criterion was chosen due to its inclusion in the SEN code of practice, which emphasises the importance of educational institutions having accurate knowledge of the progress and development of students with SEN. According to the DfE (2015, p. 25), *"Schools should know precisely where children and young people with SEN are in their learning and development. They should... keep under review the additional or different provision that is made for them."* Therefore, the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) must have a thorough comprehension of this terminology, accurately identify students who require such support, and closely monitor their progress. Schools are also required to record details of 'additional or different' provisions and have regular conversations with parents to ensure they are aware of the support in place (Department for Education, 2015).

Throughout the research journey, care and attention were given to prevent any distress for participants and their families stemming from the language employed in the inclusion criteria. Several alternative terms were considered, but ultimately, the 'additional or different' provision was deemed the most appropriate. This choice was based on the familiarity of this terminology with school staff and families, as it is outlined in the SEN code of practice (DfE, 2015). When identifying potential participants, close collaboration with the school SENCo was essential, given their oversight of the school's SEN systems. This collaboration included access to provision mapping and monitoring of the SEN register, ensuring that families were aware of the 'additional or different' support in place. To minimise any potential harm to participants or their parents, the SENCo was asked to identify students whose parents had recent contact with the school (within the academic year) regarding 'additional or different provision' and who were aware their child was on the SEN register. This approach ensured that the SENCo had a better understanding of how receptive the parents would be to their child's participation in the study.

I was mindful when framing this terminology to avoid causing any negative feelings or emotional harm to the participants, their parents, or carers. The terminology focuses on the provision that supports the young people and does not place undue emphasis on their needs, behaviours, or potential SEN labelling. A conscious effort was made to minimise the act of labelling individuals included in this study, as scholarly literature suggests labelling based on challenges may hinder their integration into educational and social communities. Labels may lead to stigma, isolation, and discrimination, which can significantly impact not only the lives of individuals themselves but also their families. Additionally, such labels can have detrimental effects on their educational inclusion (Arishi et al., 2017).

The participation of students was contingent upon their being known to the SENCo, which helped reduce participant vulnerability. The SENCo carefully considered the vulnerability of potential participants, given their familiarity with the students and their situations. Ensuring participants felt comfortable meeting and speaking with me for up to an hour was essential.

### Number of participants

Clarke (2010) suggests that IPA research benefits from a small sample size of 4–10 participants. I included six participants in the research. Given the limited time I had, this number was manageable yet sufficient to achieve the study's objectives and offer *"a new and richly textured understanding of experience"* (Sandelowski, 1995, p. 183). In line with IPA's 'idiographic commitment,' a small sample size enables a comprehensive examination of individual cases, facilitating nuanced data for each participant. Therefore, this adds to producing in-depth knowledge specific to a context, enhancing our understanding of a phenomenon.

### Recruitment of participants

All eligible secondary schools in one local authority received emails addressed to the headteacher and the SENCo outlining the research project and its participation details (see Appendix 12). Schools were invited to schedule a discussion for more information. Three schools expressed interest, while one declined due to time constraints. Among the remaining two, the participant school was selected based on the first firm response.

### Overview of participants

An overview of the participants can be found in Appendix 14.

### Semi-structured interviews

Each 25–45-minute semi-structured interview was recorded using audio equipment. Smith’s (2011) ‘good’ IPA questions inspired my ‘first draft’ interview schedule. An interview schedule provides a basic direction, but I asked extra questions if I thought the participants’ responses highlighted experiences that were crucial to the study's aims. This approach demonstrated that both the interviewee and I actively contributed to the co-construction of the produced data (Larkin et al., 2021). As a 'good' semi-structured interviewer, I aimed to speak infrequently and ask open-ended questions, giving participants the chance to explain in detail without being misled or subjected to preconceived notions. To make the interviewees feel at ease, I worked to establish a rapport with them. I also listened carefully throughout the interview and was ready to deviate from the plan if the conversation took an engaging turn relevant to the research topic (Larkin et al., 2021). I made every effort to establish a comfortable environment for the participants, aiming to foster a sense of reassurance while allowing them to share comprehensive narratives of their experiences. To foster a more open and candid discussion of their experiences, I offered questions that were open-ended, enabling the participants to provide deeper responses and openly share their viewpoints. This approach aimed to facilitate a deeper exploration of their thoughts and feelings, encouraging a richer and more comprehensive exchange of ideas. According to Smith (2011, p. 56), participants *"should have been granted an opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length*." Subsequently, I consciously avoided questions that were overly sympathetic, deceptive, or closed.

In the process, I posed further questions that offered context for the participants' answers, aiming to establish an 'interview rhythm' with them. My approach was to genuinely care about the participants' responses, aiming to elicit natural reactions. After the interviews, I requested feedback from the interviewees regarding the interview procedure, aiming to address any issues raised.

I took reflective notes immediately after each interview to maintain a reflective and reflexive mindset. These notes included my thoughts and feelings about what was stated, as well as any details that seemed particularly pertinent, emotive, or important to me.

### Transcription

All interviews were transcribed to engage with each participant's responses and immerse myself in their experiences. Following the Larkin et al. (2021) protocol, I validated my findings by listening to the recording while examining the text. An illustrative transcription is available in Appendix 15.

### Analysis

Larkin et al. (2021) argue the existing IPA research doesn't prescribe a rigid or predetermined analytical framework. Instead, it encourages an interpretive and flexible approach, allowing researchers to creatively explore the data. As a novice to the IPA approach, I sought a framework to support the stages of analysis. I adopted a method in alignment with Larkin et al.'s (2021) approach, which is demonstrated in Appendix 13. In this section, I outline and reflect on my method usage, supported by examples representing each analysis stage from the six interviews (refer to the appendices).

#### Stage 1: Immersion in data

The initial phase of this procedure involves immersing oneself in the transcripts, involving repeated readings. Immersion holds significant importance as it allowed me to establish a profound connection with the data, a practice emphasised by Larkin et al. (2021). This undertaking commenced with transcribing each interview, which I meticulously cross-referenced with the corresponding audio recordings. During this stage, I familiarised myself with the transcripts and entered the world of the participants. I read over the texts many times while also listening to the audio and trying to internalise the subtleties of tone and pauses. This allowed the participants' words to transcend mere text on a page, aiding in a richer recollection of the interviews, including social interactions and non-verbal cues. In the interest of research transparency. Appendix 15 contains a sample of an interview transcript. Some observations at this point were feeling a little overpowered by the large amount of information I had acquired, making it a time-consuming process to accurately transcribe.

#### Stage 2: Exploratory noting

I started studying the Larkin et al. (2021) book more at this point, which defines this part of the process as akin to *"free textual analysis*" (p. 79). At this stage, I avoided interpreting the young peoples’ experiences, instead taking notes on their relevant experiences, descriptions, and references. To organise the massive quantities of transcript data, I created a table in the format of a Microsoft Word document, and then I began adding exploratory comments to the appropriate columns. As I sought abstract meanings, some of my notes were descriptive and summarised the information, while others involved deeper analysis while attempting to remain close to the individuals' experiences. At this stage, I introduced colour coding to support the process of reflection and reflexivity. On the document, descriptive comments were detailed in blue, conceptual and first-level interpretive in green, and linguistic in red. I also made notes at the deeper interpretive level and continued with this approach until I was satisfied that I had captured everything I needed to interpret the interview. One table as an example is in Appendix 16. The depth of this part of the analysis allowed me to immerse myself in their worlds, grasping the nuances and complexities of their stories while simultaneously recognising the broader patterns within the experience.

My reflections at this stage included feeling deeply connected to the text and the rich description of the participants' experiences. Simultaneously, I started to notice recurring patterns as I delved deeper into the accounts provided by the participants.

#### Stage 3: Constructing Experiential Statements (ES)

I used ES to reduce the transcript and exploratory note data at this level. I added a column to the table and attempted to understand the words of the participants at this level. Occasionally, I drifted into more descriptive accounts, so I sought supervision from my research supervisor. Consequently, at this point, I introduced the 'I' of IPA, recognising myself as part of the 'hermeneutic circle' (Larkin et al., 2021). To verify that I was developing the ES with good evidence, as I worked, I switched back and forth between the transcript, the stage 2 notes and the Experiential statements. During this period, I participated in an IPA group with my peers for support to discuss the ES stage's progress and concepts. There is a sample of the table in Appendix 17.

#### Stage 4 Searching for connections

At this time, I initiated an exploration aimed at identifying connections among experiential statements. To accomplish this task, I wrote the experiential comments by hand, afterwards cutting them out and organising them on a surface for manual manipulation. Following the advice of Larkin et al. (2021), I jumbled the ES because linear presentation was no longer required. I conducted this task in conjunction with the use of a computer-based table including the experiential statements, original transcript data and the stage 2 and 3 notes. I did not keep all of the original experiential statements; however, I made a conscious effort not to exclude anything of particular significance to the participant. My goal was to strike a balance between preserving the authenticity of each participant's experience and highlighting the most relevant aspects in alignment with my research inquiries. During this stage, I began to refine and consolidate some of the ES, as combining statements helped reduce the overall volume of them. This phase was time-intensive, requiring occasional bold decisions to move ES between clusters or critically assess the clusters.

As well as organising the statements into groups, I considered their connections and how various groups of statements could be linked. Once the statements were grouped, I allocated a title to each group that captured my interpretation of their experience.

#### Stage 5 Naming the Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Each cluster of ES was assigned distinct themes that were directly linked to the experiences of each participant, following the approach by Larkin et al. (2021). These themes served as identifiable groupings for each Young Person (YP), had a personal connection to the interview material, and were presented as genuine experiences.

The process commenced with the creation of tangible representations for each PET, which can be referenced in Appendix 18. As the analysis unfolded, sub-themes naturally emerged, introducing a layer of intricacy to the data, in line with the indications by Larkin et al. (2021). This stage posed challenges, as certain topics exhibited apparent sub-themes while others did not, resulting in variations in the number of ES within each theme.

To maintain consistency and clarity, I adhered to Larkin et al.'s (2021) guidance for labelling the PET table: capital letters denoting the master theme, bold letters indicating sub-themes, original ES presented in regular text, and original participant quotes expressed in standard text format. I created PET tables for each of the six participants; Appendix 18 has an example.

I found difficulty and tension when grouping ‘PETs’ as I was fearful of losing any aspects that could be seen as significant to the participants but also needed to identify areas where there was overlap in the ‘PETs’. Some categories were then placed under the overarching term ‘PETs’, representing the highest order of grouping. To provide openness, a graphic depiction of this method is included in Appendix 18.

#### Stage 6: Moving onto individual analysis of other participants

After I finished analysing the data from the initial participant, I carefully replicated the procedure for all subsequent YP. I deliberately refrained from initiating any group or overlapping analysis until I had concluded the analysis of the last participant. This deliberate sequencing was aimed at capturing the distinctive educational experiences of each student and aligning with the idiographic principles of IPA. At this stage, I achieved a reflective and reflexive position by being mindful of my thoughts or connections I was making to previous participants' experiences. I used the reflective questions noted in Appendix 2 to make distinctions between each of the participants’ experiences.

#### Stage 7: Working with PETs to develop Group Experiential Themes (GETs) across cases

After the conclusion of individual analysis, I aimed to identify overarching patterns and significance that transcended all participants' experiences. To refine the process and experiment with alternative ideas, I printed and reorganised all the PETs and sub-themes for each YP. I used PETs, sub-themes, and experiential statements in the 'hermeneutic circle' to build meaning for all participants. According to Larkin et al. (2021), the concept of IPA does not revolve around the presentation of a 'group norm' since it is primarily concerned with idiographic exploration; therefore, I sought convergence and divergence across the data to comprehend their unique experiences. I designated these GETs as having the highest level of cross-participant classification and categorisation.

This stage was challenging as it was a time-consuming but ultimately rewarding procedure. I was devoted to respecting the ideals of IPA by sticking to the actual language of the participants and avoiding any preconceived preconceptions of what is ‘normal.’ One recurring subject, for example, was ‘security and protection’ in Student Teacher Relationships (STR), which was experienced in positive and negative ways. To address this, I used GET sub-themes, which allowed me to show 'security and protection’ as an overall group theme while also interpreting the experiences of the young people in the research as either positive or negative (sub-themes).

During the research process, one of the GETs themes underwent a significant evolution in its naming. Initially, the theme was titled 'The Specialness of the Relationship,' connoting uniqueness and importance. However, as the analysis advanced, a participant's quote, *"She means the world to me,"* profoundly resonated. This quote magnified the depth and centrality of these STR. This moment in the analysis marked the realisation that this quote not only captured the uniqueness and importance of the STR. It exemplifies the power of participant voices and the precision and depth of qualitative research in capturing lived experiences. This name change underscores the research's dedication to revealing the intricate nature of these relationships.

During the analysis, three GET themes emerged, each with its own sub-themes.

I generated a Word document for each GETs topic, as advised by Larkin et al. (2021), with sub-themes and quotations linking. Please see Appendix 20 for an illustration.

### Methodology summary

Chapter 3 provides a thorough overview of the research methodology, focusing on the adoption of IPA rooted in a phenomenological perspective. The chapter delves into ontological and epistemological considerations, recognising the subjective nature of individual experiences. It explores the three essential philosophical branches, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography that underpin IPA and elucidates their implications for the study. The phenomenological ontology guides the research, emphasising participants' uniqueness, while the idiographic approach ensures a detailed exploration of their distinct perspectives. The hermeneutic lens emphasises interpretation and the double hermeneutic inherent in IPA. Addressing concerns of quality and generalisability, the chapter aligns with Yardley's principles for qualitative research excellence. Ethical considerations, following the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, underpin the research framework, focusing on participant well-being, informed consent, confidentiality, and harm prevention. In summary, Chapter 3 establishes a robust foundation, justifying methodological choices and ethical considerations, setting the stage for subsequent phases of sampling, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, the chapter outlines the research design for exploring the experiences of mainstream secondary school students with SEMH needs, employing purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews.

# Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

## Introduction

This section presents and explores the primary ideas that emerged from the analysis. As shown in the table below, three GETS (Group Experiential Themes) were created from the seven subthemes that emerged.

*Table 1: Group Experiential Themes (GETS)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GETS | Subthemes |
| ‘She means the world to me’ | The relationship is special |
| A closeness like family or best friendship |
| Intuitive understanding between them |
| Power in relationships | Unfairness |
| Disempowerment |
| Security and protection | A sense of security and protection in the Student Teacher Relationship (STR) |
| Feeling a lack of security and protection in STR |

Each of the GETS, including the subthemes, will be examined in turn. This will be followed by a discussion of the GETs regarding the study objectives. The decision was made to present the findings and engage in discussions concurrently, with the intention of preserving an immersive focus on distinct features of the participants' experiences. To keep an overall perspective, Chapter 5 outlines the significance of these findings and provides suggestions based on these findings.

## Theme 1: ‘She means the world to me’

*Table 2: GETS* ‘She means the world to me’

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GETS | Subtheme |
| ‘She means the world to me’ | The relationship is special. |
| A closeness like family or best friendship |
| Intuitive understanding between them |

This particular GETS delves into the students' experiences of the unique and special feelings they have for at least one of their teachers at school. The central theme of this GETS, ‘She means the world to me’ comprises three sub-themes: the specialness of the relationship, a sense of closeness akin to family or best friendship, and an intuitive understanding that exists between them and the teacher. The first sub-theme underscores that, for all the participants, there is something inherently distinctive about their relationship with one particular teacher at school. They express a strong sense of comparison, noting this relationship stands out as special when compared to their interactions with other teachers in the school.

In the second sub-theme, participants use language that draws parallels between the feelings of these relationships and the bonds they share with family members or their closest friends. The third theme delves into how participants identify a significant part of what makes these relationships special: the intuitive understanding that exists within the STR. This intuitive connection contributes to the relationship's extraordinary character and significance. In the parts that follow, I will go over each of these sub-themes individually to obtain a better appreciation of the uniqueness of these STR.

### The relationship is special.

There was convergence across all participants in their expression of having a ‘special’ relationship with one person in school. I chose the word 'special'’ because I feel that through the quotes, what emerged was a sense their experiences of these relationships felt more than just ordinary but *rather* extraordinary. Through the analysis of participants' experiences, I interpreted these Student Teacher Relationships (STR) as important in their lives, which was evident from the rich descriptions provided. As I delved deeper into the quotes provided by the participants, I couldn't help but notice a recurring theme: the relationships they had were not just ordinary but something truly special. According to my interpretation, these relationships were very important to them and held a high level of significance in their lives. The way the participants described their STRs painted a picture of an unbreakable bond, one that was built on closeness, reliability, and genuine affection. These relationships were not just about companionship; they were about emotional support, understanding, and acceptance. The word 'special' is an apt description of their experiences of STR that go beyond the ordinary to create something remarkable. This was expressed in a range of ways, as illustrated in Sarah’s contribution:

*“She means the world to me” (Sarah p.10)*

Sarah’s description illustrates she holds the relationship as of central importance to her. I interpreted for Sarah the relationship is special because you would not use this term as an explanation to encompass all relationships. This feeling of specialness in the relationship is reflected in another of Sarah’s comments:

*“There isn’t another person like her.” (Sarah, p.3)*

Sarah’s comment illustrates how she feels the relationship is rare and irreplaceable, which in turn means it is special and unlike others she has experienced at school. Sarah implicitly makes a comparison to other teachers in school. Ben's comment only reinforces this idea:

*“I'd say Ms Black stands out to me the most because she just knows more, which makes it feel separate to others.” (Ben P.1)*

Ben highlights how the relationship feels different and distinct from that of other teachers in the school. He uses the term *“stands out,"* which means he is implicitly comparing his experience of this relationship to others. Ben describes the specialness of the relationship by stating that the teacher knows more about him, which is what separates and defines the relationship compared to his other experiences. Ben's description of their relationship suggests Ms Black has a deeper understanding of him compared to other teachers, making their connection unique. I interpreted a similar sense of the importance of the relationship between Ms Black and John when he spoke about the level of care, he feels is shown towards him. John described this feeling of care as something he doesn't experience with other teachers:

*“It seems like they care about you even when nobody else does” (John p.2)*

*“No one really listened to me about it except Ms Black.” (John, p.6)*

John makes a comparison between this relationship and others by expressing how he feels ‘heard’ when he is with Ms Black, which is not an experience he has with other teachers at the school. This level of comparison towards other teachers is also reflected in Jess’s comment:

*“Well, it made me feel like I had somebody in school and that I wasn't alone. And like, she was really supportive.”* (Jess p.4)

Jess’s comment demonstrates the uniqueness of the relationship by explaining it made her feel she was not alone. Jess’s experience points towards a recognition of the emotional support and connectedness she experienced within the relationship. Her statement also suggests the relationship with this person was different from other STRs in that it provided a sense of companionship and understanding. Overall, Jess’s comment emphasises the importance of supportive relationships in academic settings and their potential to enhance student well-being.

This level of emotional connectedness and support is recognised in research by the National Research Council (2003), which states that the emotional connection that a child has with adults is the most significant component in supporting healthy development, which includes greater levels of involvement in education and academic performance. Furthermore, research from Rikoon et al. (2016) claims positive STR is linked to improved emotional and social adjustment in (Young People YP). John’s comments also reflect how he felt emotionally supported during challenging times:

*“She was the one I could go to when things were hard.” (John p.5)*

John's comment expresses the importance this teacher had to him during a challenging time. The teacher stood out as a 'beacon' of support for him, someone he could rely on and seek help from during difficult times. John's words suggest a strong emotional bond between him and the teacher, highlighting the protective factors in their relationship.

Another way the specialness of the relationship was acknowledged was through descriptions that suggested a psychological connection between the student and the teacher. JJ expressed a shared and reciprocal emotional connection, as demonstrated in his comment:

*“Like she cares about me. Like I care about her, and she cares about me. We’ve got like a like a string bond…. tied together so we trust each other.” (JJ p.2)*

JJ uses the term *“string bond”* to demonstrate how he feels a connection to the teacher. I infer this to mean the connection feels strong and lasting, as they are connected even when they are not together. The metaphor JJ uses implies they have an unbreakable connection, which feels special to him. He illustrates caring is shared both ways in the relationship, acknowledging his role and the reciprocity of care. This representation of the special feel of the relationship is also reflected by John, who states:

*“she’s done a lot for me, yeah. I wouldn’t want to be at school if she left or wasn’t here. It’s like she knows me, and my troubles and I feel like she’s doing it cos she wants to.” (John p.4)*

John feels a strong connection with the teacher. His experiences imply he values this person's presence in his life and feels they understand him on a deeper level. I infer John feels the interactions with this teacher are genuine because they ‘want’ to be available to support him, rather than being the role or duty of a teacher. I interpret the experience John has had with this person as being incredibly meaningful to him, which acts as a ‘pull factor’ towards school, as he states he *“wouldn’t want to be at school if she left or wasn’t here”.* He recognises how much the teacher has helped him and how important their presence is in his life. Their connection is based on a shared understanding going beyond surface-level interactions. John feels thankful for this relationship and wouldn't want to imagine his school experience without it.

*“‘Everyone needs that person in school, like I have her.” (Rebecca, p.2)*

Rebecca uses the word 'need' when she talks about having that special and unique person in her life at school. The word 'need' implies it is essential and part of what supports her in school. Although Rebecca identifies the person she has in school as special to her, she also recognises that all students need a person in school who enables them to have a special relationship. This points to the recognition that these relationships are important, as reflected in John's quote:

*“She means a lot to me, and it means a lot to have her here for me at school.” (John p.2)*

John’s comment illustrates the level of importance he places on the relationship. By using the term *"have her here for me at school,"* it points to an experience of trust and reliability in the relationship. John recognises the teacher *"means a lot"* to him, signifying he values the relationship beyond being a student. JJ also demonstrates the importance of one STR as he speaks about it with a sense of pride:

*“She is the one that stands out and you admit to like your friends and you show everyone” (JJ p.7)*

I interpret this to mean JJ has a sense of pride in the relationship he has with the teacher because he is happy to *“show off’* the relationship to his peers. JJ also discussed how he feels prioritised by the teacher:

*“She’s really nice and like knows if you need help. She puts me first like I’m the only one there.” (JJ p.11)*

JJ’s comment demonstrates he feels noticed and prioritised when he is in the teacher’s company. This allows him to experience this shared sense of importance, which serves as a reminder his presence is valued by the teacher. By using the term *“knows if you need help,"* JJ is pointing to a level of intuition between the teacher and himself. This level of intuition adds to the GETs theme and is linked to a later sub-theme, discussed below. I interpret JJ’s usage of the term “*only one there”* to mean he senses the teacher is truly ‘present’ and connected during that interaction, allowing him to feel a sense of importance. The notion of ‘presence’ proposed by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) serves as an example for this quote because the more genuine and open a teacher is, the better equipped they are to understand the needs of others and to react to them in a way that fosters connection.

Both Sarah and Ben used the metaphors “*you click"* and “*clicked,"* demonstrating the natural and effortless feeling of the relationship, which enabled a bond between themselves and the teacher to form. My interpretation of the term *“click"* as an onomatopoeic term is indeed intentional, as it effectively evokes an image of two objects coming together closely and fitting perfectly, almost as if they were designed to connect seamlessly. It conveys a sense of precision and alignment, suggesting this relationship was intended or fits together harmoniously. This metaphorical use of *"click"* captures the idea of a smooth and purposeful connection, emphasising the seamless integration of the two people in the STR.

*“You click….you just get along with them. Or they use it to talk to you and have a laugh with them and everything.” (Sarah p.1)*

*“But then when I started talking, I don't know, I just like the bond clicked. And then I just like I've been open with her ever since.” (Ben p.8)*

This natural and effortless feel to the relationship with one teacher is also shown in Jess’s statement:

*“So just like, I feel like I've got you know, the right fit for me like the right teacher to speak to, I feel like she understands my needs and everything.” (Jess p.10)*

When Jess uses the term *"the right fit for me,”* I interpret that to mean she can be herself, and the teacher unconditionally accepts her needs. I feel that by using the term “*The right fit,”* Jess is demonstrating that she recognises their relationship is the right fit in both directions, making it feel special. Jess went on to speak about how the teacher had left the school, which meant she had lost that key relationship; this is represented in the following quote:

*“She left about two weeks ago. So she was kind of like my main, like, help teacher, and she was there if I ever needed her. I still feel like we will always be close.” (Jess p.6)*

I interpret Jess’s sadness that the teacher is no longer at the school; they formed an exceptional relationship which allows her to feel an ongoing sense of connection, representing an enduring closeness despite the distance. When Jess commented *“she was always there if I ever needed her,”* it demonstrates the sense of reliability and trust she had developed in the relationship, making the relationship feel distinctive. The degree of uniqueness in the relationship was also evident in the remarks made by Ben:

*“Me and Ms Black are so close. She said, I’m gonna tell you this. And when she told me this, I was like, oh, we have so many close experiences, it’s unbelievable.” (Ben p.10)*

Ben expresses the specialness of the relationship by stating how they share close experiences. His use of the word “*unbelievable”* demonstrates his disbelief that they could share such similarities, indicating he did not feel this was possible until he experienced it directly. The description of a sense of closeness is also present in Rebecca’s comments*:*

*“She’s, my favourite. We are so close.” (Rebecca p.3)*

*“I’m really close with her at the minute and like she just helped me so much, and I know that she's a teacher that I can just go to and talk to whenever I want.” (Rebecca p.6)*

This recognition of closeness is also present in previous research by Fredrikson and Rhodes (2004), who define closeness as one of the indicators of a ‘strong’ STR. Closeness will be discussed further in the next subtheme, ‘a closeness like family or best friendship’.

### A closeness like family or best friendship

There was a divergence in the data for this sub-theme. All participants except John expressed familiarity with their experiences of STR, indicating the relationship felt similar to that of family or friendship. Although there are differences in family relationships and friendships, the comments indicate a closeness not indicative of a traditional STR, pointing to the specialness of the relationship. This subtheme emerged as participants talked about their experiences with the teacher, where the relationship felt ‘special,’ and there was a use of language more akin to that of family or friendship than the traditional teacher-student dynamic. Participants spoke of a closeness that has developed in relationships as well as a direct comparison to friendships within the school context, as demonstrated in Sarah’s and JJ’s quotes:

*“And like the ones that they're really close to, like, you have like best friends. They are like your teacher best friends.” (Sarah p.1)*

*“I’ve known her for a long time and we’re like best mates” (JJ p.2)*

Sarah makes a direct comparison between the relationships she has with friends and teachers, which is defined as having a feeling of closeness. JJ also refers to a teacher as being *“like best mates”* which is marked by the passing of time. This acknowledgement of time is also present in Jess’s comment:

*“The first time I met her, I just felt that she were a really lovely teacher. It was like starting a friendship.” (Jess p.10)*

During this part of the interview, Jess reflected on how the relationship felt when she first met the teacher and compared it to a budding friendship. Ben expands on the feeling of friendship by explaining what it feels like to be in the company of the teacher:

*“Not pressurising anyone, treat them like a friend. It sounds weird. But like, instead of treatment, like I need to get this out of them and like, elaborate on why they're feeling like this.” (Ben p14)*

I perceive Ben’s comment as highlighting the importance of closeness in an STR, which can have a similar feel to friendship. Ben identifies he wants to be treated by teachers in a way that is similar to friendship through emotional support from adults without an agenda that can often be present in schools. I feel Ben’s comments demonstrate a desire for ‘genuine’ support without any pressure to share. The following quote from Ben also reflects a lack of pressure during interactions, which is important:

*“And when I was helping her, we just started having a conversation, we had music on and we're sharing sweets and we were just like started talking” (Ben p.7)*

As I reflected on this statement, I likened it to friendship, as it demonstrates a natural and effortless feel of the interaction during the space that developed. This natural and effortless feel to the relationship is also reflected in Sarah’s statement:

*“And then I don't have many friends myself, so I go sit with her at break and lunch. And she's really nice about it and we literally talk about everything.” (Sarah p.2)*

Sarah speaks about how she chooses to spend time with one teacher at social times at school. The way she described the interaction elicited an image of a friendship-type relationship in that she explained how they *“talk about everything”.* Similarly to Sarah, Rebecca also chooses to spend time with the teacher at break or lunch times, which is indicative of the value she places on the time they spend together:

*“I'll probably go find her at lunchtime because I want to spend time with her, a bit like friends.” (Rebecca p.5)*

*“And even if sometimes she's not on our break for lunch, and I don't talk to her, I feel better, even if she's just in school. And just seeing her in the corridor makes me feel happier." (Rebecca p.6)*

The two remarks from Rebecca show how she enjoys the teacher's company while they are together. Rebecca mentioned she prefers spending social time with the teacher, demonstrating a desire to be in her company as she would be with friends. Additionally, Rebecca conveys the joy she experiences when she is with the teacher and the sense of security she experiences while she is at school.

Another way the participants referred to the STR was through a comparison of their relationship with family members. The subtheme of STR feeling like family is also represented by Milner and Tenore's (2010) proposition that teachers' conceptions of school as a community, in which students and teachers are conceptualised as members of the same family. JJ makes a comparison between family and the relationship he has with one adult at school.

*“It’s like your family but at school.” (JJ p.6)*

I interpret JJ’s comment as representing a closeness like family at school, which is a rare and precious thing to find in a school setting, which demonstrates how the relationship transcends the classroom and helps to feel a sense of belonging in school. Ben also refers to his relationship with one teacher as equally as special as that of a family member:

*“I get along so well, with my mum and I felt like I've developed that bond with Ms Black.” (Ben p.6)*

Ben makes a comparison between how well he gets along with his mum and shares that comparison with the teacher at school. Ben refers to the ‘bond’ between them, which could be thought of through an attachment lens such as the previously mentioned AT (Bowlby, 1969), which suggests the formation of attachments is fundamental to relationships in families. Later in the interview, Ben went on to make further similarities between his relationship with the teacher and his mum:

*“she's like a second mum.” (Ben, p.9)*

The statement suggests the teacher has played a maternal role in Ben's life, providing emotional support and guidance, making a positive impact, and holding high regard. Ben continues to clarify his experience of this relationship further by expressing:

*“She doesn’t remind me of my mum but she’s like a mum because she's like, caring and like, listens to you instead of like, shutting you off. I don't know. It's just, it felt like I can talk to her.” (Ben p.10)*

Ben identifies he feels ‘heard’ when he is around the teacher because she listens, and he doesn’t feel the teacher is *“shutting you off”.* I interpret this term to mean Ben feels some teachers are not interested in listening to him, implying a lack of care. The notion of ‘cutting off’ interaction between a teacher and student is also noted by Barnes (1992) as a way teachers fail to respond to their students during interactions by stunting the conversation. Ben describes further how being around the teacher makes him feel nurtured and cared for, which is why the relationship feels like family. Similar themes around providing a caring space in STR, including a relationship that ‘feels like family,’ are also present in research by Newcomer (2018).

### An Intuitive understanding between them

There was convergence across all participants' experiences for this subtheme. The subtheme of intuition fits well with the GETS theme because this level of intuition often goes beyond words and is only achieved through a deep understanding and connection with another person, making it special. This subtheme emerged as participants spoke of an intuitive understanding from some teachers who also supported well-being. This is demonstrated in Sarah’s quote, which points to an unspoken understanding within the STR:

*“She knows when I need more that day.” (Sarah p.4)*

Sarah uses the word *“knows,”* implying the teacher intuitively understands when Sarah needs more support, indicating a level of insight into what would benefit her in the moment. This builds an unspoken understanding between Sarah and the teacher. Jess also uses the word *“know”* to illustrate how some teachers have a level of intuition regarding her emotions:

*“And yeah, she's also quite supportive. I mean, to be honest with you, all the teachers are, but some teachers are more like, aware than others about how I'm feeling. They just know.” (Jess p.2)*

Within this quote, I feel Jess is acknowledging that many teachers can recognise her emotional state, but others can go beyond being aware of her emotions and have a greater sense or intuition of how Jess is feeling. This same level of emotional attunement is also demonstrated in the quote by JJ:

*“She knows when you’re upset or angry or like scared’…. She can just tell by my face.” (JJ p.2)*

I interpret this comment by JJ to mean the teacher is emotionally attuned to him and capable of ‘reading’ his emotional state due to a developed level of intuition regarding his emotions. The emotional component in the STR was also noted by Roorda et al. (2011), who argue that relationships should encompass warmth and empathy to support the emotional needs of YP and foster social competence. Attunement has been a focus in STR, with Faircloth and Hamm (2011) suggesting that a student's sense of belonging is linked to teachers' receptivity. Rebecca’s comment illustrates the same degree of receptivity demonstrated by the teacher.

*“So I was like, so overwhelmed and everything. And she just calmed me down, but we didn’t have to say anything.” (Rebecca p.7)*

What struck me in Rebecca's quote was the strong sense of comfort and reassurance she experiences in the presence of the teacher. Rebecca highlights the calmness that emerges from being in the company of the teacher, particularly when she is feeling overwhelmed. The absence of language during the interaction suggests a level of unspoken intuition or attunement between them.

When Ben spoke about his close relationship with one teacher in school, he referred to feeling pressured to speak to some teachers and the difference it makes when a teacher demonstrates an unspoken intuitive understanding.

*“Instead of feeling like there has to be pressured, because if you feel pressured, then you are not likely to talk about how you feel, then you won't get anywhere. It’s more like they just know what to do when they see you.” (Ben p.14)*

I infer this statement refers to a level of understanding between Ben and the teacher that allows Ben to feel a reduced sense of pressure on him. A similar sense of emotional reassurance is also demonstrated in John’s comments:

*“She just tries to make sure everything is all right cos she knows what’s going on, my situation and tries to what’s it called when you like make sure, and reassures you.” (John P.13)*

*“but when they are talking to you, you feel a little bit better cos they talk sense." (John p.8)*

John’s comment represents the shared understanding in the relationship, which points to a level of shared intuition between them that supports his feeling better. I interpret this to mean they are on the same ‘wavelength’ because John feels the communication from the teacher makes ‘sense’ to him. Ben's experience of feeling understood on a deeper level is a powerful one:

*“And then they'd go into like deeper meanings, so they'd like well why did you think it means this and does it relate to your situation and that's when they got stuff out of me. And then they understood me on a deeper level” (Ben p.5)*

In my interpretation, it appears that the teacher he was talking to helped him uncover the underlying meanings behind his thoughts and feelings. By asking probing questions and encouraging him to reflect on his own experiences, they were able to draw out insights he may not have been aware of himself. This process of exploration and discovery allowed Ben to feel seen and heard, demonstrating that this kind of deep understanding can be transformative, helping him connect more deeply with himself and others.

### Discussion of Theme 1 - ‘She means the world to me’

When exploring the theme 'She means the world to me,' it's essential to link a range of research and theories to the GETS theme. This will help address the research aims focused on understanding the lived experiences of STR for students attending mainstream secondary schools.

The Special Relationship

All participants in the study highlighted the unique and profound connection they shared with one teacher who stood out from the rest. This sense of closeness is fundamental to the theme and is recognised in the literature as a key indicator of strong relationships and enhanced student well-being (Lin et al., 2022). Through these close relationships, a compassionate teacher has the capacity to transform a child's relational models, behaviour, and interpersonal interactions (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In essence, the teacher becomes a secure base by establishing a close and supportive relational environment, which can be particularly beneficial for vulnerable or insecure children (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This research bears particular value as it centres on students who may feel insecure or vulnerable in relationships which could coincide with the cohort under examination in this thesis, individuals with Social Emotional and Mental Health needs.

Lin et al. (2022) emphasises a significant link between high levels of student hope and the intimacy experienced in STRs. It suggests that, within the context of a nurturing STR, a student can develop more self-assurance in their abilities and come to perceive challenges as opportunities rather than insurmountable obstacles, ultimately motivating them to pursue their goals.

The characteristics that set these special relationships apart from others are akin to humanist values that are beneficial to students in general. This involves a connection between a student and a teacher characterised by empathy, understanding, warmth, and sincerity. As Rogers (1969) posits, this can be achieved by the teacher's genuine effort to comprehend the world from the student's perspective, fostering diversity and individual growth. This is evident in quotes from the participants, such as John's reflection*: "It seems like they care about you even when nobody else does"* (John, p. 2).

Each young person in the study spoke of a profound connection with one adult at school who provided unwavering support during difficult times and offered essential emotional assistance. This echoes research findings by Couper & Mackie (2016), who discovered that YP who thrive despite adversity typically have at least one supportive relationship with a parent, caregiver, or another adult. This study is especially valuable to reference since it focuses on students who have faced adversity, which may be similar to the cohort (those with Social, Emotional and Mental Health(SEMH) needs) in this thesis. While maintaining anonymity, it is apparent from the participants' accounts that many of them faced adversity and difficulties in their lives, making the 'special' STR a vital source of support during challenging times.

To promote students' overall well-being, Lin et al. (2022) offer additional evidence of the importance of nurturing strong STR. They emphasise the need to raise awareness of the significance of STRs and to contribute to the growing body of research supporting the 'protective factor' of strong STRs for students' psychological health. Further support for the significance of at least one stable, caring, and supportive relationship with an adult, which may include someone in education, comes from Shonkoff (2015). This suggests that such relationships have the power to help YP cope with adversity, develop resilience, and acquire skills for behaviour regulation which is especially valuable to the cohort outlined within this thesis.

Many participants spoke about the unique connection they had with their teacher, setting this relationship apart from others. JJ’s description of a *"string bond"* tying him and the teacher together prompts a reflection on Gergen's relational theory (Gergen, 2009). This theory emphasises that individuals are inherently interconnected within their relationships, emphasising the idea that we are not isolated beings but rather intrinsically connected to others through various relational ties. The concept of a *"string bond"* implies a strong, inseparable connection between JJ and the teacher, suggesting their relationship transcends conventional teacher-student dynamics and values.

Gergen's relational theory challenges the notion of one-sided or hierarchical relationships, emphasising that relationships are co-constructed and mutually influenced. JJ and the teacher actively shape their unique bond, reflecting the theory's idea of interconnectedness that goes beyond this specific relationship and encompasses all our interactions. This interconnectedness is crucial in shaping our identities, experiences, and emotions. It challenges the idea of self-reliance and independence, asserting that our sense of self emerges through our interactions and connections with others. In JJ's case, the *"string bond"* illustrates how his identity and experience are intertwined with the teacher's presence in his life, underscoring the significant impact of this relationship on his sense of self and well-being.

The findings consistently highlight that students feel heard when teachers value their opinions, actively listen to them, and treat them with respect (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). This not only helps the relationship stand out but also deepens the sense of connection which is an important aspect to consider in all STR as well as the cohort defined in this research. This is exemplified by Ben's statement: *"No one really listened to me about it except Ms Black*" (Ben, p. 6). What is evident from the quotes is a sense of 'authentic presence' and recognition embedded within the interactions, enabling YP to feel heard and valued in this 'relational space.'

The results related to the characteristics of a special STR are consistent with the work of Cefai and Cooper (2010), who argue that students appreciate teachers who exhibit traits such as warmth, care, friendliness, dependability, consistency, and support. These qualities are known to promote productive relationships in the broad range of STR and are pertinent for those with SEMH needs (Pomeroy, 1999). The findings lead us to the conclusion that for a young person to feel important in a relationship, they must first be seen and heard in their interactions. The participants desired to experience the teacher as being 'present' during the exchanges in an authentic way, as this would allow them to develop an emotional connection with the teacher and contribute to the unique sense of the STR.

A Closeness Resembling Family or Best Friendship

The subtheme of closeness resembling that of family or friendship emerged from the data, with participants describing a unique connection they shared with at least one teacher during their time at school. Their language often resembled descriptions of familial or friendly bonds rather than conventional STRs. This subtheme focused on the intimacy developed in their interactions with these teachers, with participants frequently drawing parallels to the friendships they had experienced.

While the literature on the idea of friendships within STRs is not common, Newcomer (2018) suggests that students often perceive STRs as resembling friendships, despite substantial differences. The comparison is typical of the experiences of many research participants, who describe interactions with their teachers as joyful and fun, akin to what one might experience in a friendship. These experiences could be seen as having a 'therapeutic element,' echoing the principles of Gestalt therapy (Perls et al., 1951). According to Yontef and Jacobs (2013), human growth can occur through relationships characterised by warmth, care, and authenticity, qualities often found in friendships and reflected in the participants' quotes. This highlights the importance of relationships for the broad group of students and the role they play in personal development and well-being.

Feeling Like Family

The subtheme of feeling like family also emerged from the data for some of the participants. Milner and Tenore (2010) propose the concept of teachers viewing school as a community, where students and teachers are considered members of the same family. This perspective emphasises a supportive and nurturing environment, encouraging teachers to develop close and caring relationships with their students, akin to familial bonds, as reflected in the quotes by the participants. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance within the school community, providing emotional support to students and acknowledging their social and emotional needs.

The notion of teachers as ‘attachment figures’ is a perspective that can be applied to STRs, where teachers serve as reciprocal caregivers. Riley (2009) suggests that AT provides a lens through which to view STRs because teachers can be viewed as key figures in fostering relationships that lessen negative effects for students who may otherwise struggle academically which is especially valuable for the cohort within this thesis as those with SEMH needs are more likely to struggle academically. This is exemplified in quotes from participants like Ben, who compared his relationship with his teacher to the bond he shares with his mother, stating, *"I get along so well with my mum, and I feel like I've developed that bond with Ms Black"* (Ben, p. 6), and JJ, who expressed, *"It's like your family but at school"* (JJ, p. 6).

AT, when applied to STRs, highlights the strong sense of connectedness described in the quotes. It underscores the importance of a stable STR in fostering consistent, attentive, and empathetic interactions. Schools could recognise the significance of raising awareness of AT among school staff to encourage more relational interactions between teachers and students. Further benefits of raising awareness about AT include enhancing cognitive processes for emotion regulation, nurturing moral reasoning, and cultivating feelings of security, self-awareness, and empathy (Schore, 2001; Sroufe & Siegel, 2011). In addition to helping children generally in schools, supporting YP in this way would also help those with SEMH requirements.

Intuitive Understanding Between Them

The concept of intuition as a teaching strategy has been acknowledged by Iannello et al. (2020). However, limited research suggests emotional intuition between a teacher and a student, as it is more commonly linked to teaching approaches (Iannello et al., 2020). In the absence of extensive research on emotional intuition, it's essential to make connections to other areas, such as interpersonal closeness in STR, to address the research question effectively.

Interpersonal closeness is a fundamental aspect of human relationships, as highlighted by Leary and Baumeister (1995). It refers to the emotional and psychological connection between individuals, fostering intimacy and trust. Several prominent psychological theories delve into the significance of interpersonal closeness, including AT, interpersonal theory, and Self Determination Theory (SDT).

Interpersonal theory, which encompasses various aspects of human relationships, emphasises dimensions like friendship and communion. According to Horowitz and Strack (2010), the theory places importance on friendship in human interactions, involving shared experiences, emotional support, and mutual understanding. Connection, as described in this theory, pertains to the emotional bond and empathic connection between individuals, as reflected in quotes like Rebecca's: *"So I was so overwhelmed and everything. And she just calmed me down, but we didn’t have to say anything"* (Rebecca, p. 7). This demonstrates the teacher's capacity to tune in and empathise with her, fostering closeness and solidarity in the STR.

The quotes from the participants in this subtheme point to a shared understanding or connection that exists in these 'special' relationships. This can be compared to the fundamental principles of SDT, as they reflect a strong sense of belongingness and connection in the young people’s experiences, mirroring the core tenets of SDT. The concept of relatedness, essential to the theory, underscores the innate human desire for meaningful bonds and emotional connections, which are present in the quotes from the participants' narratives. These experiences highlight the significance of interpersonal closeness in all human relationships, emphasising its role in fostering positive emotions and overall well-being, as described in SDT.

In conclusion, the theme 'She means the world to me' revolves around the exceptional nature of special STR in the lives of students attending mainstream secondary schools. These relationships are marked by profound closeness, emotional support, and a bond that transcends conventional teacher-student dynamics. Gergen's relational theory, AT, and the importance of authenticity and intuitive understanding all contribute to a deep exploration of this theme. Whether these relationships resemble family or friendships, their significance in fostering emotional support and a sense of belonging cannot be overstated. These findings emphasise the critical role that teachers play in the lives of their students and underscore the need to nurture and support the well-being and personal development of students.

## Theme 2: Power and STR

*Table 3: GETS Power in Relationships*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GETS | Subtheme |
| Power in relationships | Unfairness |
| Disempowerment |

In contrast to the impactful first Group Experiential Themes (GETS) theme, students also expressed experiences of unfairness and disempowerment in their teacher relationships. The theme 'power in relationships' power imbalances involving sanctions, perceptions of being 'picked on' or 'singled out,' and feelings of injustice in the Student Teacher Relationship (STR). This exercise of power resulted in frustration, disempowerment, and adverse effects on students' learning and mental well-being.

Within this theme, two subthemes are identified: unfairness and disempowerment. Power imbalances in educational settings are well-documented due to inherent power dynamics in schools (El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021). These dynamics can be influenced by intersubjective processes. The student quotes in this research reflect these historical power dynamics and conflicts in the STR, as noted in the literature (Jamieson and Thomas, 1974).

### Unfairness

For instance, the quote by John demonstrates a sense of unfairness he experienced within an STR:

*“When I’ve done stuff and it’s my fault yeah fair enough, I can take a comment about…but just when I haven’t and everyone else is doing it, he singles me out.” (John p.11)*

The frustration expressed in the quote illustrates the complex interplay between personal responsibility, social dynamics, and the perception of fairness or unfairness. I interpret this to be understood as a sense of inequality and perceived injustice through feeling targeted by the teacher, which leaves him feeling ‘singled out’. I recognise within John’s quote an acceptance of his responsibilities, which indicates a willingness to learn and grow, but he feels disheartened when his willingness is not acknowledged or reciprocated by the teacher. John's experience suggests a power dynamic within the STR where the teacher exercises their authority in a way that targets and blames him disproportionately. The mention of *"everyone else"* implies John perceives a double standard or selective treatment, which may undermine John's confidence, create a sense of resentment, and diminish his trust in the fairness of the educational environment. Rebecca also uses the term ‘singled out’ to explain how she feels:

*“I don't like it because it feels like I'm being singled out because I haven't been in lessons because of my anxiety and everything, or because I don't understand it. and because I'm just anxious in the moment and I feel like I have been singled out because of it”. (Rebecca p.8)*

Rebecca’s statement highlights this cycle of anxiety has emerged through feelings of unfairness towards her, which act as a barrier to her active participation and engagement in the lessons. I interpret Rebecca's feeling that the teacher doesn’t understand the needs around her anxiety, which results in her feeling ‘singled out’ thus further exacerbating her feelings of anxiety. Further comments by John and Sarah demonstrate how they feel they are targeted and pursued by the teacher:

*“It’s just like everyone else is saying stuff talking or owt but he picks on me.” (John p.9)*

*“It’s like I’m already anxious and they are then shouting on top. Or like they know that you've got like the problems but they still like pick on you”. (Sarah p.8)*

Sarah's statement conveys a sense of heightened anxiety and frustration stemming from a perceived lack of understanding and empathy from her teacher. Despite Sarah's existing anxious state, she feels as though her teacher intensifies her distress by consistently singling her out for criticism. This reveals a level of frustration and unfairness with the teacher's apparent failure to recognise her struggles or offer support. It suggests Sarah desires a teacher who can empathise with her challenges and respond more compassionately. Such an environment, where Sarah's needs are not adequately acknowledged or addressed, contributes to a continued sense of powerlessness. This same lack of understanding by the teacher is also present in the quotes by Jess and Sarah:

*“Like, if you do the one thing wrong, like I could be sat there, like just not doing anything, like looking out the window for two minutes. And I'd get screamed at like, well that’s your comment”. (Jess p.12)*

*“I’m just sat there and then I get shouted at.” (Sarah p.20)*

These quotes reveal a power imbalance within the STR, where the teacher wields authority and enforces disciplinary measures. My interpretation of Jess’s comment suggests the sanctions imposed on her are disproportionate, creating a sense of injustice. The teacher's actions appear to prioritise control and discipline rather than understanding or addressing the underlying reasons for the behaviour. The use of sanctions reflects a more traditional approach to STRs, characterised by a communal and involuntary dynamic where power disparities are evident (Lodge & Lynch, 2004). This dynamic reinforces the teacher's authority and control over the students, diminishing their agency and fostering an atmosphere of fear or intimidation.

*“I’ve always been told, treat people how you want to be treated, so I act all nice for them, but they just act all mean to me.” (JJ p.4)*

*“he’s just unfair with some people and nice with others. He should be fair with everyone.” (John p.12)*

The quotes have a resounding theme that they desire to be treated fairly in the relationship but have not received it. JJ's statement reveals a profound awareness of the contrast between his values and the treatment he receives from some teachers. This comment demonstrates JJ's genuine desire for reciprocal treatment aligned with his values. He values the idea of being treated with kindness, empathy, and fairness. Yet he experiences a disconnect between his expectations and the reality of how teachers treat him. JJ's opinions align with those of the research, which found students believed equal power could be achieved by teachers demonstrating to their pupils they value their opinions, listen, and act respectfully (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Further research reveals students want to be treated fairly, with respect and allowed to speak up if they feel they are being subjected to unfair treatment (Jahnukainen, 2001). Fairness is reported to be essential for the growth of positive STR, which is supported by Frymier & Houser (2000) as the skill students believed was most crucial for effective teaching. This desire to be perceived differently by the teacher is also reflected in the statements by John:

*“Yeah, I’m not that badder student, I don’t think but it just seems that he sees me like that…. he’s an absolute wanker [sighs]”.* (John p.10)

*“I don’t understand why he can’t wish for me to do well too, like the others…. you know.”* (John p.4)

In John's statements, he expresses his perception that his teacher views him in a negative light, which results in a sense of unfairness. Despite not considering himself a particularly bad student, John feels the teacher sees him in a different, unfavourable way. This comment and sigh convey John's disappointment and longing for the teacher to hold a more positive opinion of him. This discrepancy between his self-perception and the teacher's perception contributes to a disheartening experience for John, where he wishes for a more favourable view from the teacher. During the interview with John, he spoke in depth about his experiences with one teacher where there was a recognisable power imbalance within their interactions through the use of sanctions:

*“I said, sir do you go to the gym, and he said that’s your comment. If someone else asked that he have a laugh back and go, does it look like I go to the gym. But if I ask it, I get a comment. He didn’t give me it in the end cos I went…. what is your problem with me, cos I just feel like he doesn’t like me at all.”* (John p.9)

When John spoke about how the teacher revoked a sanction against him after being challenged, I interpreted John must have felt hurt and rejected, indicating a lack of liking or acceptance. John continued:

*“I was just looking at the board and he goes, Matt\*, stop talking, and I said isn’t that a verbal and he looked at me dead in the eye and said if I do that it’s a verbal.” (John p.11)*

*\*[This name has been changed as part of the anonymisation process]*

John speaks about his unfair treatment by the teacher and uses the phrase *"he looked me dead in the eye,"* which illustrates an emotional dynamic within their relationship. John perceives this as the teacher asserting their dominance over him by stating he will use sanctions to control John's actions. For children to learn, they must be free to take social and intellectual risks, which calls for a sense of safety and belonging (Buyse et al., 2009). As a result, there are arguments against the use of sanctions in school settings. YP who develop close relationships with their teachers tend to be more prosocial, take part in extracurricular activities more, and perform better in school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Whereas YP who frequently argue with teachers are more likely to have strained relationships with educators throughout their academic experiences (Jerome et al., 2009). Additionally, they have a higher propensity to lose interest in learning (Portilla et al., 2014) and to develop negative attitudes towards education (Hamre and Pianta, 2005). Moreover, punishment creates an ‘emotionally insecure environment’, which makes it unlikely it will improve the STR (McNally and Slutsky, 2020), which may cause students to cooperate less. This implies punishment does not always result in learning for students, which interferes with the internalisation process and may instead cause the issue to worsen (Lewis et al., 2011).

During Jess’s interview, she expressed her experience of anxiety and worry caused by the varying expectations different teachers in the school have of her, which can feel unfair at times:

“*And I worry about like, either gonna be nice, and they're gonna be unfair, or they're gonna shout all the time, and they're gonna make you answer questions if you don't feel comfortable to. And I always think about all that through my head.” (Jess p.15)*

In this passage, Jess expresses her worries about the ‘fairness’ of the treatment she may experience from teachers, which has an impact on her wellbeing. These concerns reflect her apprehensions about negative social interactions and the potential challenges they may pose. See reflective log 1 Appendix 1 for further reflections linked to this point.

### Disempowerment

The following section will look at the second subtheme of this GET. As a result of the power imbalance and feelings of unfairness, I believe students began to feel disempowered within relationships, and the feelings of unfairness led them to feel the power had been leeched from them. The quote from Sarah candidly reveals the emotions she experienced during her interactions with her teacher. Her expressed feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and heightened anxiousness shed light on the power dynamics within their STR:

*“Like if I didn't understand the work, he would be like oh, well, Sarah has not done her work or listened, and he would like announce it to the whole class. I just wanted to run away, I just wanted to get out.” (Sarah p.12)*

I feel this statement by Sarah demonstrates a level of interpersonal power that can be seen within the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF). Interpersonal power is defined as “*the power to look after, not look after, or protect someone; to help or abandon or leave them; to give, withdraw, or withhold love and care; to undermine or support others in the development of their beliefs and identities”* (BPS, 2018, p. 35). The quote, I feel, makes Sarah feel there is a lack of care from the teacher and a lack of support. The school may find it helpful to view issues through the PTMF to understand the meaning-making that has taken place and the ‘what has happened’ to a person rather than a focus on behaviours from a ‘within child’ position.

The power dynamics within their STR have created an environment where Sarah is left feeling disempowered and voiceless. The public humiliation and embarrassment she experienced when her shortcomings were announced exacerbated her feelings of disempowerment as the power was leeched away from Sarah. The teacher's actions, whether intentional or not, reinforce the perception that power is concentrated solely in the hands of the teacher, and Sarah's agency and autonomy are diminished. By publicly highlighting Sarah's lack of understanding, the teacher not only exhibits a disregard for her feelings but also reinforces a hierarchical dynamic wherein the teacher's power is asserted at the expense of Sarah's self-esteem. Consequently, Sarah is left feeling disempowered in her relationship with the teacher. A similar vein of a sense of powerlessness is also presented through Jess’s quote:

*“You just got to sit there. Do it, cope.” (Jess p.21)*

During the interview, Jess spoke about when the teacher shouted at her and she had to *“cope”* with it, highlighting the limited choice or power she had in the situation. I interpreted this to mean she felt helpless within the STR.

John refers to the way he is treated concerning learning and how this can leave him feeling dismissed and invalidated:

*“Sometimes they treat you like you’re thick if you don’t understand it. Stuff like that”.*  (John p.12)

I interpret that this experience diminishes John's confidence and invalidates his knowledge and perspective. Which may have a significant impact on John's self-esteem and engagement in the learning process. Feeling belittled and invalidated, John may have felt disheartened, leading to decreased motivation and a reluctance to participate actively in the classroom.

*“.. I did nothing wrong, so I didn't deserve to get exclusion. I got excluded for two days because of that teacher and I thought there is no point even coming to this school.” (JJ p.2)*

JJ’s comment makes me think about the sense of rejection and hopelessness he was feeling about his exclusion from school, which resulted in him disengaging. A similar idea is present in research by Cefai and Cooper (2010), who reported many students’ responses to challenging teachers' use of sanctions as leaving them with no choice but to resist the system or disengage from it. I had further reflections linking to this quote see reflective log 2, Appendix 1.

Sarah and John also reflect on how they feel teachers use sanctions unfairly:

*“That's like a big thing in our school because of the discipline and everything. They can say it how it is, but as soon as you want to, or if you want.... say you get a comment, and you don’t accept it, and you could say it, and then they'll go home and ring your parents.” (Sarah p.14)*

*“cos I just feel like he doesn’t like me at all. He gives me the most comments.” (John p.9)*

I interpret Sarah's feeling that there is a whole school approach to discipline that teachers follow in the school, which leaves her feeling unheard and frustrated, resulting in a sense of powerlessness. From John’s comment, I interpret a sense of hopelessness he experiences because whatever he does, he feels the teacher is going to give him sanctions anyway, so he has abandoned any hope things will change. This theme of teachers not listening is present in other quotes:

*“And I’ve got iso\*for it because the teacher won’t hear them out.” (JJ p.15)*

*\*[isolation]*

*“Because they think the relationship is all on discipline, and they don't want to hear you out on it.” (Sarah p.14)*

I interpret the comments from JJ and Sarah as expressing a sense of frustration at the lack of opportunity to feel heard by the teachers. It could be argued students are attempting to make sense of a 'school paradigm' in which teachers set boundaries, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment in YP, and the inability to feel heard can contribute to this.

Just as it is important to listen to the views of YP, it is also important for teachers to reflect on the power imbalances that exist in STR. I interpret Sarah’s comments to demonstrate that the teacher holds the power within their interactions, as there is an inconsistency that is likely to feel confusing.

*“Like she would give me the side eye and everything. I was like, I don't need that. But then she's like my best pal now. Like she'll come up to me and talk to me all the time. She’s like contradicting herself and her that’s choosing when we are ok or not.” (Sarah p.16)*

*“It’s up to them when they want to be your best pal and everything. Like, it's up to them if you need them; its if they're ok with it.” (*Sarah p.17)

The two quotes by Sarah add further depth to the power difference in the STR. In the first quote, Sarah shared that the teacher gives her negative attention in the form of *“a side-eye”* which I feel asserts a position of authority over Sarah, which creates a sense of intimidation or discomfort for her. The power imbalance in this context is evident in the teacher's ability to control the dynamics of the relationship. The teacher decides when to be approachable and when to be distant, influencing Sarah's feelings of acceptance and belonging. This highlights the asymmetric nature of the relationship, with the teacher having the authority to dictate the level of closeness and support given to Sarah. In the second quote, Sarah further highlights how, at times, the interaction with the teacher can feel like friendship, yet this is done on their terms rather than based on her needs. Again, I feel this demonstrates a sense of disempowerment in the relationship because, as the student, she doesn’t feel she can challenge or change the dynamic of the relationship.

### Discussion of theme 2: Power and STR

When considering this theme, a variety of research and theory can be linked to the GETS theme, power, and STR, which will be addressed in this section, as well as its relationship to the research objectives: *What are the lived experiences of the STR for YP attending a mainstream secondary school.*

Unfairness

Power imbalances in STR literature have long been linked to student satisfaction and learning (Jamieson and Thomas, 1974). Analysis of the data revealed the themes of 'unfairness' and 'powerlessness,' which are reflected in relevant theory and research, contributing to the research objectives.

There are several ways to view power in STR; one is that proposed by Gordon and Foucault (1980). According to Gordon and Foucault (1980*), “power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between the threads; they are always undergoing and exercising this power”* (p. 98). In the context of schools, Foucault's quote suggests power is distributed through a complex and interconnected network rather than by a single authority figure or institution. Individuals are both subjected to and exercising power within this net-like organisation, so power is not static but dynamic. This idea is reflected in the quote by Sarah, p. 14, who highlights how the power imbalance is present at a whole school level as she refers to discipline being *“a big thing in our school”.*

Viewing the power dynamic in an STR through the Typology of Relational Power (French et al., 1959) sees teachers as authority figures who use five relational power bases (reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power). Some of these are relevant to the participants' experiences. For instance, when John mentions, "*They treat you like you're thick,"* it could be linked to 'expert power' as the teacher's subject knowledge gives them power over John, making him feel academically inadequate. As John explains, *"I said isn't that a verbal, and he looked at me dead in the eye and said if I do that, it's a verbal"* (John p. 11). In my interpretation, this leaves John feeling unfairly treated because he believes the sanction would not be applied to his peers for the same behaviour. These sanctions could be categorised as 'coercive power' within the Typology of Relational Power, aligning with other definitions of power, such as the capacity to influence the actions of others (Fiske and Berdahl, 2007; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Considering social interactions as power struggles, where individuals seek to assert control and influence, presents an alternative perspective on classroom power imbalances. Guinote (2007) delineates a clear power division in education, with teachers wielding greater control and authority while students depend on them. This power dynamic is vividly demonstrated in Sarah's quote:

*“Like if I didn't understand the work, he would be like oh, well, Sarah has not done her work or listened, and he would like announce it to the whole class. I just wanted to run away, I just wanted to get out.” Sarah p.12*

The students in this research desired power equality, in line with previous findings, believed to enhance their sense of belonging and foster positive social interactions, which in turn can boost academic performance which is pertinent on a broad level to all students. According to the students, achieving equal power requires teachers to demonstrate value for their views, pay attention to them, and treat them with decency (Cefai and Cooper 2010). Both JJ and Sarah expressed their desire to be 'heard' by their teachers, stating they want teachers to *"hear you out on it"* (Sarah, p. 14).

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on injustice in educational settings, positioning fairness as a critical issue in schools (Donat et al., 2012). Despite universal acknowledgement of the need for fairness in the classroom, numerous studies reveal that students often feel unfairly treated (Israeshvili, 1997). Their research indicates that students perceive their teachers as dispensing unfair punishments and rewards. In addition, it is recognised that those with SEMH needs are the most likely group to be excluded from school (Condcliffe, 2023), this means it is pertinent to the cohort in this research.Gouveia-Pereira et al. (2003) and Schmidt et al. (2003) found that students who perceive fair treatment from their teachers are more likely to accept and adhere to school rules and norms.

Student-teacher conflict situations resulting from unfairness can lead to increased indirect interpersonal aggression and hostility within the STR (Chory-Assad & Paulsel, 2004). Furthermore, students who have been treated unfairly are more likely to engage in bullying behaviours towards their peers (Donat et al., 2012). The experience of justice contributes to the development of an equitable worldview (Dalbert & Stoeber, 2006) and has a positive impact on the classroom climate and students' trust in each other (Correia & Dalbert, 2007). Conflicts over procedural, distributive, and interpersonal fairness at school, however, may worsen school distress (Correia & Dalbert, 2007).

Disempowerment

The second subtheme emerged: a sense of disempowerment for the participants within their STR. It is recognised in the literature students can take a ‘powerless’ position due to the hierarchy that exists in schools and their influence over grades and sanctions (Aruta et al., 2019). One could contend that in the classroom, the teacher has more power and influence while the student is more reliant and in a helpless position (French et al., 1959). Further support by Cefai and Cooper (2010) also notes feelings of ‘powerlessness’ for students in their research. The main way the students in this research defined a feeling of powerlessness or disempowerment was from a feeling their voice had not been heard. Students who are given the chance to voice their ideas are better equipped to comprehend how their choices impact both their connections with others and their ability to learn. As a result, they are more equipped to take charge of their behaviour and behavioural change, which lessens their sense of hopelessness and alienation (Hapner and Imel, 2002; Kroeger et al. 2004; Norwich and Kelly 2006). Including the student's point of view promotes more effective learning and positive classroom behaviour, which is beneficial for both students and staff. The following quote, I feel, could be used to reflect this situation and highlight the importance of listening to the views of YP:

*“In so many ways, adults determine the boundaries of children's social worlds . . . Recognising children as social beings should lead us to shift our scholarly analysis, our politics, and our practice in ways that respond to children's rights and interests and to listen to what children can teach us about being a child in the world”. (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 33)*

This quote emphasises the significant influence adults, especially in schools, have on shaping children's social experiences and interactions. The authors argue that recognising children as social beings should lead to changes in how we approach education and interact with children in educational settings. This can be achieved by empowering and respecting children's rights, viewing them as social beings, and acknowledging their agency, voices, and rights. Schools should aim to empower students, involve them in decision-making, and respect their perspectives and opinions.

Research has suggested ways that schools can level out power imbalances.

Humphrey (2008) emphasises involving all students in decision-making for classroom and school rules. Moreover, Jones et al. (2013) advocate replacing corporal punishment with positive reinforcement and teaching teachers about discipline instead of punishment. Furthermore, McHugh et al. (2013) propose mutual respect and guiding principles to balance the teacher-student power dynamic. Cook-Sather (2006) promotes gathering student input to influence school change through methods like student councils and open discussions.

Shifting from adult-centric to child-centric approaches and accommodating children's needs, interests, and developmental stages is recommended. These changes involve altering perspectives and power structures (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mayes et al., 2018). To establish a positive STR, a balanced power dynamic with respect, care, and reciprocity is essential within all STR but will also be pertinent to the students with SEMH needs included in this research (El Zaatar, 2011).

Just as within the quotes, students wanted to feel shared power, which is reflected in the quote:

“*By sharing power with students, listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers and policymakers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have a voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces, hope can emerge”* (Freire and Freire, 1994) (p. 491).

In conclusion, this quote urges a paradigm shift in schools' approach to children's social development. Recognising children as social beings with rights and interests can foster a nurturing, inclusive, and empowering educational environment that values each child's contributions and perspectives. Actively listening to their experiences and voices provides valuable insights for improving the school environment and educational practices.

## Theme 3: Security and Protection

*Table 4: GETS Security and Protection*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GETS | Subtheme |
| Security and protection | A sense of security and protection in the Student Teacher Relationship (STR) |
| Feeling a lack of security and protection in STR |

This Group Experiential Theme (GETS) theme emphasises the significance of experiencing security and protection in Student Teacher Relationship (STR), comprising two contrasting subthemes: 'a sense of security and protection in the STR' and 'a lack of security and protection in the STR.' Participants consistently shared experiences related to both subthemes, recalling instances where teachers provided them with a sense of security and protection, as well as instances where they felt the opposite.

As highlighted in the literature review, STR significantly influences students' academic and emotional development. Cultivating feelings of security and protection in these relationships is essential for creating a positive learning environment that fosters student growth. When students experience a sense of safety and support, they are more likely to engage actively in their education and realise their full potential, as evident in the shared experiences. Participants discussed how trust and a nurturing atmosphere contributed to their sense of security and protection within STR, making them feel cared for, acknowledged, supported, encouraged, and comforted. Conversely, they also described feelings of discomfort, unpredictability, a lack of care and empathy, and a loss of trust in their relationships with certain teachers, resulting in a lack of security and protection within the STR.

### A sense of security and protection in the STR

In this subtheme, all participants shared their experiences of feeling protected and secure in some STR. This aligns with existing theory and research on the importance of trust and emotional security in healthy relationships, particularly in the student-teacher context. They expressed how certain teachers made them feel emotionally safe, allowing them to freely express their thoughts, opinions, and concerns without apprehension of criticism or mockery. This trust played a pivotal role in establishing a sense of safety and security, as illustrated in the following quotes:

*“Obviously, she's going to tell Ms Silver and my mum. But yeah, other than that, she she wouldn’t go in the staffroom and say you will never guess what I've heard. Blah, blah, blah. I don't think she’d ever do that.” (Ben p.19)*

Ben talks about his experience with a teacher whom he feels he can trust, but there is also a sense of trust shared both ways within the relationship. As Ben experienced trust in the relationship, it built further feelings of trust between them:

*“But when she told me…. I wasn't going to spread it.” (Ben p.18)*

*“…and then because I got talking, I got like a stronger bond and stuff, that I could trust them with anything. Because I have to trust them now because they know so much about me, I can't not trust them.” Ben (p.5)*

Ben explains sharing personal information with someone has strengthened their bond, creating a deeper connection and a sense of trust. This is because the person already knows a lot about him through their previous conversations, making it difficult for him not to trust them. The act of sharing personal details creates a sense of intimacy and vulnerability, making the bond stronger and more likely for Ben to confide in them further. Jess also talks about her experiences of trust in relationships and how it helped to reduce her feelings of anxiety as the relationship developed:

*“So they didn't really know who I was to start off with. But then I started to just get like a close relationship with them. And like, they kind of know who I am now they know my worries, they know what I struggle in. So they kind of just they understand now.” (Jess p.5)*

As shown in the quote, when students trust their teachers, they can openly express their thoughts and concerns without fear of judgement. Teachers build trust through empathy, active listening, and respecting boundaries. Research confirms that emotionally safe classrooms encourage academic risk-taking and seeking assistance for all students (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

Another way that participants experienced feelings of security and protection was through a supportive classroom environment through the creation of an inclusive and accepting space where they felt valued and respected, enhancing their sense of security. Rebecca’s quotes demonstrate how this was done concerning academic work:

*“Because I felt good around her, she really brings my love out for English. and like made me enjoy English a lot more.” (Rebecca p.4)*

*“Like you could, if you have an issue with anything, or like you're struggling with something you can go to them for, like advice on the next step. And like what you could do better.” (Rebecca p.1)*

I interpret Rebecca's feeling that the teacher fosters a warm and supportive classroom atmosphere, allowing her to feel secure, which has fostered a deeper connection with the subject and the teacher, ultimately leading to a more positive and enriching educational experience for her. Rebecca mentions how she *"felt good around"* her teacher, demonstrating a level of comfort in the teacher's company. This is likely because she feels a sense of security in the STR, which contributes to her overall sense of safety while learning. The second quote by Rebecca suggests she could ask for support and take risks in the teacher's company. The need for security in STR, which supports positive academic outcomes, is also supported by research in this area conducted by Rimm-Kauffman et al. (2015). Jess also refers to feeling "good" in the teacher's company.

*“Well, with Mr Red, like, I feel really, I just feel really good. That he’s there for me. Like, it just feels really nice. And, like, it's so nice.” (Jess p.7)*

Teachers can also contribute to students' feelings of security by promptly and effectively communicating with them about their emotional and academic needs (Reyes, 2012). This is accomplished by offering constructive and positive feedback, as illustrated by the following quotes from Jess and Rebecca:

*“My maths teacher sometimes that, like, I'm struggling because usually on a Monday, I struggled quite a bit. And I say to him, can you like, come and check on me in the lesson, and he will like, kind of walk around and just kind of like, give me a thumbs up to see how I’m doing.” (Jess p.2)*

*“And like she'd always come and see like she's always like, come and check my work and give me feedback. And now I do more by myself.” (Rebecca p.3)*

I interpreted that when John felt teachers genuinely cared about and were interested in his well-being, he felt more secure in the relationship. This is demonstrated by the passage that follows:

*“And she sees how you’re actually doing, and I can say how I am feeling and stuff like that.” (John p.14)*

*“Yeah…. like last week I was very annoyed about something in history, and I slammed my hand on the table and that and she took me outside and talked to me for a bit, let me calm down. And I were ok when I came back in. It’s just little stuff like that she makes it alright. I feel like she’s kind to me and gives me time.” (John p.2)*

This level of care is also present in Ben’s quote:

*“So she's just helped with that and then just like talking to me and like, giving me like little postcards coz at parents evening we get postcards for how well we've done she'd put like, it normally just says, well done, your child has done well in this subject, this subject. Whereas she put like a meaningful note on the back which said about my strengths.” (Ben p.5)*

In Ben's quote, he expressed feelings of care from the teacher towards him because the note offered individualised attention and acknowledged his strengths. Research has also shown recognising students' strengths by teachers is an effective technique for fostering strong STR (Hattie, 2009).

In the following quote, Sarah recounts a moment when she experienced care following a panic attack at school:

*“I remember one time about a panic attack. And she literally saw me in the corridor, and she came over to me, and hugged me until I had calmed down. And then she let me go talk to her, so I was like, so overwhelmed and everything. And she just calmed me down.” (Sarah p.6)*

Sarah experienced a panic attack, and her teacher intervened by offering comfort and allowing her to express herself. This empathetic response, coupled with supportive actions during the panic attack, had a profound impact on Sarah, demonstrating a strong sense of emotional support and understanding in their STR.

This same level of emotional reassurance at times of heightened emotion is present in JJ and Jess’s quotes:

*“He like he he knows like so many techniques to calm me down if I’m really stressed out, cos I’m like doing a load of revising for my exams for like a year’s time. Like he calms me down proper easy.” (JJ p.4)*

*‘If they think I'm like finding it difficult. And then they might be looking out for me and some lessons. Like if I look a bit flustered. Yeah, yeah, they're just like, they like to comfort me.” (Jess p.15)*

The use of the phrase *"looking out for me"* in Jess's quote, which I believe implies a level of care and protection on the part of the STR towards Jess, demonstrates how she felt a sense of safety from her teacher. As well as this, Jess experiences a balance between feeling protected by her teacher and being encouraged to take risks and challenge her boundaries at school:

*“Like, so it helps when he is encouraging me because it kind of gives me more of that push. But as well I'm like, what if I don't want to go? I don't want to go. So sometimes he's like, well, I'm never gonna say to you can't come into the bridge, I just want to encourage you. Yeah, so if I do, if I don't really want to go, then I am allowed to stay in there. He just encourages me to obviously go.” (Jess p.7)*

The experience of Jess evoked a mental picture of the balance between independence and protection, such as the cycles of protection within a primary carer relationship or the idea of ‘holding’ a young child (Winnicott, 1979). As children develop, adults respond to their needs for protection or exploration of the world, knowing there is a secure base to return to when needed. In this example, the teacher takes on the role of protector but also a facilitator to allow the student to adapt to the world around them, similar to the idea referenced in ‘Circle of Security’ (Cooper et al., 2011).

Jess's statements suggest a strong sense of partnership within the STR, which contributes to feelings of security at school. These are illustrated by the quotes that follow:

*“I feel like I've gotten really close to them over like the last two weeks, because they've been there for me.” (Jess P.8)*

*“And I was just thinking to myself, like, why were they even panicking when Ms White when I've got these two lovely teachers here to help me? So I just feel like really happy that, you know, that they are there to support me and I'm not on my own.” (Jess p.7)*

Jess's expressions, such as *"they've been there for me"* and *"I'm not on my own,"* strongly imply feelings of support, companionship, and a teacher-student partnership, reminiscent of an attachment and secure base dynamic. In terms of AT, Jess's statements reflect an emotional connection to her teachers, particularly Ms White. This emotional bond aligns with Attachment Theory (AT) core principles, where individuals seek reliable figures for emotional support and security. Jess also views her teachers as her secure base, a concept in AT symbolising a source of safety and support that enables individuals to confidently explore the world. In Jess's case, her teachers fulfil this pivotal role, assuring her she is not alone and providing support and guidance. This secure base empowers Jess to navigate school challenges with confidence and emotional well-being.

I was interested in the literature around partnership in STR, as I feel this approach challenges the traditionally hierarchical and authoritative STR dynamics, offering a different perspective and identifying the dynamics of these relationships. Giving students the chance to actively engage in all facets of their education and their learning can be used to define partnerships in educational settings (Harrington et al., 2014). A partnership-based approach draws attention to the quality of the STR, where students assume more responsibility and autonomy. This challenges the presumptive roles that define what it means to be a student and a teacher (Matthews, 2017).

It is also important to the participants, John, Sarah, and Ben, to have a relational space where they feel comforted and secure with the teacher. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

*“She sat with me for a long time and for ages I dint want to talk but she just sat there with me and waited until I could do something.” (John p.7)*

I feel John has experienced a compassionate response from a teacher as she sat alongside him creating a space that contributed to feelings of security. What struck me from the quote was the level of emotional attunement and understanding between them, which allowed John time to feel supported. This sense of security and protection through a ‘relational space’ that is created by the teacher is also present in Sarah and Ben’s quotes:

*“Because I know since Ms Teal, it's been easier to come in and everything. and I know when I'm in school I have a safe space with her.” (Sarah p.21)*

*“It just, I don't know, it was just it felt like homely. Like I could talk to her. But it didn't feel like I was pressured to say anything that I wasn't comfortable with.” (Ben p.7)*

*“But I couldn't breathe. I didn't want to talk about it. So we just sat alongside each other in the office and then the bridge.” (Ben p.15)*

Sarah's interaction with Ms Teal has made attending school easier, indicating her presence positively impacts her willingness to attend. She feels comfortable and safe in her company, creating a 'relational space'. Sarah feels the teacher has created a safe environment where she feels secure and supported, enhancing her engagement in her studies and social interactions.

 Ben describes his positive experience with Ms Teal as a *"homely"* environment, which I interpret to mean he feels security and comfort when talking to her. Using the term homely is a strong metaphor that suggests a strong sense of belonging, comfort, safety, and nurturing when talking to Ms Teal. It signifies an informal and personal relationship, emphasising the depth of their connection beyond a typical teacher-student dynamic. This is demonstrated in the second quote by Ben, where he felt overwhelmed and Ms Teal sat alongside him, creating a nurturing space where he felt safe and secure. When the teacher is supportive, it offers a powerful sense of reassurance and comfort, which builds a sense of security in the relationship, as represented in the following quote:

*“And I have this like one teacher that I just go to, like, whenever she just like, has a door open for me. It’s like no matter what she will let me just go speak to her. And I can speak to her about anything and everything. She just helps you out with it.” (Sarah p.2)*

According to my interpretation, Ben felt the teacher created a space where he felt ‘heard’, adding to his sense of security in the relationship:

*“Well, Ms Black. I talked to her about a lot of my issues. Yes, because I struggle with issues at home and at school.” (Ben p.2)*

Within STR, whether and how students are encouraged to ‘feel heard’ can be a crucial factor for determining the success of interactions with teachers. Research suggests teachers themselves require help to develop these connections: support from the school institution as a whole, support from the community, and support from society at large (Murdoch et al., 2020). In the discussion section, the idea of ‘feeling heard’ will be covered in more detail.

### A lack of security and protection in STR

There was convergence amongst participants in this subtheme. Through the interviews, the participants shared that feelings of security and protection were lacking in some STRs, which contrasted with the previous subtheme. According to my interpretation, the participants experienced this lack of security and protection as feelings of apprehension, unease, challenges with emotional connection, and occasionally feeling on guard in the relationship. Additionally, there were instances of relationship ruptures without repair.

JJ talked about how he felt the need to be cautious and vigilant when being in one classroom due to his relationship with the teacher, which suggests a need to protect himself emotionally:

*‘‘And then I feel I have to be ready……. on my guard when I go into that class.” (JJ p.8)*

The quote, in my opinion, captures JJ's need to defend himself and the lack of security and protection that can be found in the STR. His ability to feel at ease, open, and involved in the learning process can be hampered by this sense of being on guard. This theme is also present in John’s quote:

*“And now when I think about his lessons I don’t want to go, or I know I have to be ready for what might happen next time.” (John p.11)*

John’s quote indicates a lack of security in the STR, which I feel is apparent from his use of the term “*be ready”.* This term, I feel, points to an experience of self-protection in the STR. Sarah noted a similar feeling of struggling to let down her emotional barrier in the teacher’s company:

*“I find it really difficult to let down the barrier when if you've had them as a teacher before and it’s not been ok.” (Sarah p.17)*

Sarah uses the metaphor of “*let down the barrier"* which I feel she uses to explain the emotional or psychological defences she has put in place to protect herself from potential harm or negative experiences in the STR. Just like a physical barrier, such as a wall or a fence, can be erected to create a boundary and keep things out, an emotional barrier serves a similar purpose in protecting oneself from emotional vulnerability. I interpret Ben also felt the need to protect himself in one STR:

*“I wouldn't open up because I felt vulnerable, but not like, in a positive way. I'd feel like I don't know. I feel like I was an easy target if I opened up to him.” (Ben p.10)*

This quote from Ben indicates he feels the need to protect himself in the STR as he can feel vulnerable, which means he has reservations about being emotionally open and expressing his feelings to the teacher. Ben is hesitant to open up due to a fear of being taken advantage of or hurt. The line *"I feel like I was an easy target if I opened up to him"* further illustrates Ben's fear of being emotionally exposed which I feel is due to the lack of security he feels in the STR. He feels that if he were to share his inner thoughts and emotions with this person, he might become an *"easy target"* for potential emotional harm. This made me wonder if this fear may be rooted in past experiences or a lack of trust in this STR.

The following quote from Jess demonstrates how she worries about the interactions she might have with teachers:

*“Because sometimes I'm on a night like, on a night, I'm speaking to my mum. And I'm like thinking about, what my teacher says that about this and, and I kind of go over it and I'm thinking, how is that teacher gonna react?” (Jess p.14)*

I interpret Jess’s quote as experiencing a sense of worry about her interactions with one teacher, meaning she doesn’t feel secure within the STR. This same level of guardedness or emotional distance in the STR made it difficult for the participants to have emotional security, as demonstrated in the quotes:

*“So then I just sit there, and then I end up crying there. Then they have been like, well, why are you crying? And I'm like, they don't understand it.” (Sarah p.8)*

*“It’s like they can’t go there…. with supporting because they don’t have the time.” (Jess p.10)*

*“Like today I just feel not the best, but I put on my fake smile as usual because I can’t tell them, and no other teachers question you.” (John p.15)*

I interpret John’s quote as demonstrating he doesn’t feel emotionally secure in his relationships with most teachers; therefore, he is not able to express himself emotionally and covers up his true feelings when with his teachers. Sarah’s comments demonstrate a lack of understanding or empathy from teachers towards her emotional needs, which makes it difficult for a secure relationship to form.

*“Like, you know, you might cry, and then someone asks you loads and loads of questions at once. And it just overwhelms, and it puts you off. Like most teachers do that. I don't, I don't need that. I just need to sit down. I need to talk to you. But not ask me questions.” (Sarah p.19)*

*“I don’t think they understand that part of the relationships. Like empathy for our situation.” (Sarah p.15)*

Sarah identifies teachers who fail to recognise that demonstrating empathy towards learners is an important part of building feelings of security in the STR. This is also reflected in Ben’s comment:

*“Just treat it like a normal person, like you're having a normal conversation. If you treat it like that, then they're more likely to open up. So they're not like, oh, what’s going on? Tell me why your sister's crying? Who has done this? Why have they done this? And why it's like, kind of like an interrogation when you're at stage one, which isn't how it should be.” (Ben p.14)*

Ben's statement indicates a lack of empathy in the STR. The teacher's well-intentioned actions made him perceive an agenda, leading to feelings of a lack of empathy. Ben believes the teacher views his emotions as problematic rather than something to be understood, creating a sense of insecurity in the STR. The importance of emotional availability from teachers in establishing STR security is recognised by students, as demonstrated in Jess's quote:

*“But sometimes, if the like they teaching are there in a lesson, they can't always be there for you for your emotions like 100%.” (Jess p.9)*

I feel Jess’s quote recognises the challenges the teachers face in meeting the emotional needs of YP while balancing this with their teaching responsibilities, which I feel is reflective of the challenges teachers face. This difficulty in meeting the emotional needs of YP is also recognised in research by Nekhorosheva & Nekhorosheva (2020), who report there are aspects of the teaching role that hinder emotional connection and care. For example, teachers find it difficult to spend time with each student during the day and find it difficult to provide personalised care for children.

The interviews revealed feelings of unpredictability and uncertainty, which I interpret as causing difficulty feeling secure in STR. These two quotes by JJ illustrate this:

*“Because they don't know me and maybe I don't know how they're going to act.” (JJ p.17)*

*“When I’m in that lesson I don’t feel good about it…. like wondering what will happen next and if the teacher is off with me that day.” (JJ p.10)*

This quote indicates JJ experiences a sense of unpredictability and uncertainty in his relationship with the teacher, which I feel exacerbates the lack of security and protection in the STR. I interpret this as being characterised by uncertainty leading to discomfort and anxiety. This uncertainty affects JJ's comfort and confidence in the learning environment. During a lesson, JJ feels uneasy due to uncertainty about the class structure and perceived inconsistencies in the teacher's behaviour. These emotions can be distressing and negatively impact JJ's overall well-being and learning experience. JJ uses the term the teacher is *"off with him"* on that day. I feel this suggests JJ perceives an unpredictability in the teacher's behaviour, contributing to a lack of security and protection in the STR.

As previously recognised in the literature review, a sense of care in STR is valued by students to help develop strong connections (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). However, Sarah’s quote demonstrates she experienced a lack of care from the teacher around the recognition of her needs:

*“He got emails about it so many times. But he's, he's like, I don’t know if he didn't care. But it seemed like he didn’t care.” (Sarah p.14)*

The following quotes from Sarah demonstrate an experience of ‘rupture’ she had with the teacher which has not been ‘repaired’ and has continued to have a detrimental impact on their relationship and her mental health:

*“So, you can just write it in for me and he started screaming. It literally got to the point where a teacher had to come and sit in the lesson with me, so I didn’t have to talk to him.” (Sarah p.12)*

*“It was really overwhelming for me, and I could never have a relationship with him for that.” (Sarah p.13)*

I interpret Sarah experienced a deep sense of rupture within the relationship that has not been repaired, causing her to feel a lack of security in the STR. This notion of rupture and repair in STR is also present in previous research by Fitzimmonds (2021), who states for empathic repair to take place, teachers must be a part of a warm, relational environment. The research by Fitzimmonds bears particular value as it centres on students with SEMH needs which aligns with the cohort under examination in this thesis. According to Miller-Bottome (2018), rupture is the result of an inability to accurately respond to another person's needs, which is referred to by Greene (2000, p. 295) as the "*inability to achieve mutual intersubjectivity,”* which could explain Sarah’s experience with the teacher. According to Raider-Roth et al. (2012), repair is defined in educational literature as *"a reconnection between the learning partners."* If repair is successful, the post-rupture learning relationship is thought to have improved because more mutual knowledge and understanding were attained during the repair process (Gilligan, 2003).

This quote demonstrates how Rebecca feels insecure around her teacher which prevents her from asking for support with her work as well as spending time thinking about the situation. I feel her doubt and hesitation demonstrate a level of insecurity in the STR:

*“I'm a bit like, do I, do it? And then I'm like, I don't want to. I don't want to keep asking what I'm doing.” (Rebecca p.11)*

Jess and John also spoke about their experiences of finding it difficult to ask for support from the teacher, when they have not developed a secure STR:

*“I do struggle, and I think, or I don't remember to ask my teacher for help. And sometimes worrying might stop me asking.” (Jess p.16)*

*“So that means I don’t feel ok to ask that teacher for help in the lesson because I feel unsure of the reaction I’ll get back.” (John p.5)*

I interpret John’s quote as pointing to an experience where he has not felt secure in the relationship to ask for support and a level of apprehension around the teacher’s response, which leads him to hold back from asking. Teachers can foster trust by demonstrating empathy, active listening, and respecting students' boundaries. This is important because students who feel emotionally secure in the classroom are more willing to take academic risks and ask for help when needed (Pianta & Hamre, 2009).

### Discussion of Theme 3: Security and protection in STR

From the analysis, the theme of security and protection in STR emerged, rooted in trust, emotional safety, reassurance, creating a relational space, and feeling heard. Conversely, students felt a lack of security and protection when they perceived guardedness, lacked empathy, encountered unpredictability, or received inadequate care in STR. In some cases, this absence of security and protection followed relational ruptures in STR. These subthemes will be explored concerning relevant theories and research.

The term security in STR refers to a concept viewed from various perspectives. One perspective emphasises the teacher's crucial role in creating a safe, protected atmosphere for a student's personality development. The need for protection and security in STR is represented in the literature by Nekhorosheva & Nekhorosheva (2020, p. 654), who states that students *"need, on the one hand, protection, space, support, and, on the other hand, intimacy, time, and interaction to form a sense of security."* Pianta (1999) further supports the idea that teachers contribute to students' sense of security at school, suggesting that an attuned STR helps develop feelings of security and support for students (Pianta, 1999). The research by Pianta is applicable to the broad range of STR as well as being pertinent for those with SEMH needs.

In contrast, the quotes revealed the participants' experiences of needing to protect or guard themselves in the STR due to a lack of security and protection. This has been linked to unfavourable outcomes for young individuals. Research indicates that emotionally unsafe STRs create a school climate in which students feel unsafe, leading to increased stress, reduced school attendance, and hindered participation in learning (Shean & Mander, 2020). Furthermore, students who experience relationships where the teacher is in a reactive state and struggles with personal connections experience uncertainty and insecurity. Consequently, the teacher is unable to offer help, provide safety, care for a student, or establish an atmosphere of closeness (Skinner & Beers, 2016). According to Klassen and Kim (2019), this will result in students experiencing threats and insecurity in the STR and the overall environment.

When students experience emotionally secure STR, it provides a more secure learning environment, resulting in positive identity development, better learning experiences, and higher feelings of value (Shean and Mander, 2000). There are identified advantages to having a sense of security in an STR. If safe and secure circumstances exist, it may improve a student's academic success and personal growth in educational connections (Nekhoroshevea & Nekhoroshevea, 2020). These advantages are emphasised by quotes such as this one from Rebecca, highlighting improved academic enjoyment due to the STR:

*“Because I felt good around her, she really brings my love out for English. and like made me enjoy English a lot more.” (Rebecca p.4)*

Längle (2013) offers another definition of security in STR, stating that security is a blend of space and intimacy, meaning 'being able to be here' while experiencing closeness. Security combines a sensation of protection (acceptance) with personal care (engaging in a connection with oneself and others, giving and receiving care).

When discussing security, it's crucial to consider the concept of secure attachments, initially introduced in AT (Bowlby 1969). Attachment theorists argue that when parents provide children with emotional support and a predictable, consistent, and safe environment, children become more self-reliant and willing to take risks as they explore the world, knowing that an adult will be there to help if needed (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). This theory has been widely adopted and demonstrated in educational settings (Pianta, 1999). The idea that a sense of security in an STR can promote independence is reflected in the quote by Rebecca, who has experienced close support from the teacher, fostering her confidence:

*“And like she'd always come and see like she's always like, come and check my work and give me feedback. And now I do more by myself.” (Rebecca p.3)*

The quotations revealed the students experienced a level of sensitivity in the STR, which contributed to feelings of security and protection. This was done as teachers created environments in which students felt safe and free to explore and learn through consistent, timely, and responsive interactions (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). This supports Pianta's (1999) research, which reveals sensitive teachers can assist students in feeling secure in exploring their surroundings and coping with the challenges of school, influencing students' learning behaviours and development (Pianta, 1999). The research by Pianta is applicable to the broad range of STR as well as being pertinent for those with SEMH needs.

The importance of STRs is emphasised in this theme, as they are crucial for the holistic development and success of students. These relationships foster trust, respect, and emotional safety, enabling students to engage in the learning process with confidence and enthusiasm. A secure and protective relationship not only enhances academic achievement but also contributes to the social and emotional well-being of students, providing a safe space for personal growth and critical thinking.

This research indicates to build and maintain such relationships, teachers must demonstrate professionalism, empathy, and commitment to their students' welfare. Educational institutions and policymakers also play a role in fostering an environment that prioritises secure and protective STR through supportive policies and resources. The significance of security and protection in STR cannot be overstated, as they shape not only the educational journey but also the lives of students, leaving a lasting impact beyond the classroom.

## Findings and Discussion Conclusion

This chapter has presented three themes and linked them to theory and research through the three discussion sections. In essence, the theme “She means the world to me'” emphasises the remarkable significance of special STRs in mainstream secondary schools. These connections, marked by profound closeness and emotional support, go beyond traditional dynamics. Rooted in Gergen's relational theory and attachment theory, and emphasising authenticity and intuitive understanding, this exploration highlights the pivotal role teachers play in shaping students' well-being. Whether mirroring family or friendships, these unique bonds offer crucial emotional support, emphasising the need to nurture and support such relationships for the holistic growth and well-being of students in mainstream secondary education.

The second theme highlights power dynamics in STRs, revealing subthemes of 'unfairness' and 'disempowerment.' Unfair treatment and unequal power structures affect students' sense of belonging. Disempowerment stems from students feeling unheard, emphasising the need for shared power in STR. The analysis advocates for a paradigm shift, recognising students as social beings, involving them in decision-making, and fostering balanced power dynamics for an empowering educational environment. Listening to students' voices is crucial for a positive shift in educational practices.

Security and protection in STR is a critical theme, focusing on trust, emotional safety, and their impact on students' overall development. Teachers play a key role in creating a secure atmosphere, contributing to well-being and academic success. Conversely, a lack of security can lead to negative outcomes. Secure STRs positively influence learning experiences and identity development. Attachment theory aligns with this theme, emphasising emotional support. The research underscores the importance of professionalism, empathy, and commitment from teachers in fostering secure relationships. Policymakers and institutions are urged to prioritise and support an environment that values secure and protective STRs, recognising their lasting impact beyond the classroom.

# Chapter 5: Key Findings, Returning to the Research Questions, Strengths, Limitations, Reflections, Recommendations and Future Research

## Key findings

The theme "She means the world to me" explores the unique and profound connections students form with specific teachers in mainstream secondary schools, emphasising the exceptional nature of these relationships. Drawing on theories such as Attachment Theory (AT), Gergen's relational theory, and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the findings highlight the significant impact of special Student-Teacher Relationships (STR) on students' well-being. Participants consistently described these connections as resembling family or best friendships, emphasising their co-constructed and therapeutic nature. The study underscores the crucial role of intuitive understanding in fostering emotional support and a profound sense of connection. Overall, special STRs contribute significantly to students' lives, providing essential emotional support during challenging times. The research advocates for raising awareness about the importance of nurturing strong STRs in educational settings.

The research explores power dynamics and STR in mainstream secondary schools, uncovering the themes of 'unfairness' and 'disempowerment.' Drawing on Gordon and Foucault's notion of power as a net-like organisation and the typology of relational power, the study highlights the complex and dynamic nature of power in STR. Students express a desire for equal power, emphasising the need for teachers to value their views and treat them fairly. Unfairness in discipline and sanctions contributes to students feeling disempowered and marginalised. The findings underscore the importance of fairness and student participation in decision-making to balance power dynamics and foster positive STR. The research calls for a paradigm shift towards child-centric approaches, recognising children as social beings with rights and empowering their voices in educational settings.

The analysis reveals the central theme of ‘security and protection’ in STR, encompassing trust, emotional safety, reassurance, the creation of a relational space, and the feeling of being heard. Students expressed the need for protection and support in STR, emphasising the teacher's role in creating a secure atmosphere for personality development. Conversely, a lack of security leads to guardedness, a perceived lack of empathy, unpredictability, and insufficient care, resulting in adverse outcomes for students. The concept of secure attachments, rooted in AT, highlights the importance of consistent and safe environments in fostering independence and confidence. Sensitivity in STR, demonstrated through consistent and responsive interactions, contributes to students' feelings of security. Overall, the findings underscore the pivotal role of security and protection in STR, impacting academic success and holistic student development. Teachers, educational institutions, and policymakers are urged to prioritise and cultivate an environment that fosters secure and protective STR, recognising their profound and lasting impact on students' lives.

The research findings unveil the extensive scope, deep significance, and diverse range of young people's experiences. This exploration led me to reconsider the tendency of previous research to oversimplify and crudely depict STR. The complexities of these relationships have come to light, showcasing their multifaceted and profound influence on young individuals. It is profoundly moving to witness the crucial role these relationships play in their lives.

## Development of a conceptual model

In the initial phase of the research, during the literature review, I extensively delved into various theories, including Attachment theory, Sociocultural theory, Humanist principles, Gergen’s relational theory, Self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan, and Wentzel's work on Relatedness. These theories served as a theoretical foundation to comprehend and analyse STR.

Throughout the phases of findings and discussion, existing theories were recurrently referenced to shed light on specific facets of the STR. However, the culmination of this research led to a crucial observation, none of these theories singularly encapsulated the intricate complexity of the STR. Dissatisfaction with the existing theoretical explanations prompted the adoption of a metaphorical approach. The theories were employed not as comprehensive frameworks but rather as tools to illuminate distinct aspects of the relationship.

In the metaphorical context of light refracting through a prism, the STR is likened to pure, white light, with the theories serving as analytical instruments. The prism, functioning as an interpretive tool, dissects and examines the STR, revealing different facets through various theoretical perspectives. Each theory acts as a unique wavelength of light, contributing specific insights into different dimensions of the relationship.

Exposing the STR to these theoretical perspectives is akin to shining a spotlight on distinct facets of this multifaceted phenomenon. The recognition of the inherent complexity of the student-teacher relationship is highlighted, acknowledging that no single theory comprehensively captures its entirety.

After completing my analysis, I delved into the unique features of each theory to deepen my understanding of their various facets and how they contribute to our comprehension of STR. I critically viewed the theories using different headings, which assisted my comparison of the theories. I employed key headings to critically assess psychological theories relevant to student-teacher relationships see Appendix 21. This structured approach facilitated a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the theories in question. This process included examining the intersections among these theories, as evidenced in the table (Appendix 22). This table integrates multiple psychological theories, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding student-teacher relationships. It recognises the diverse influences of attachment, sociocultural dynamics, humanistic principles, self-determination, and relational processes, contributing to the complex and multifaceted nature of educational interactions. Researchers and educators can use this framework to guide their understanding and practices, fostering positive and effective student-teacher relationships.

Whenever these theories resonated with a relevant quote or theme that emerged, I integrated them into the discussion section of the thesis. However, I couldn't shake a sense of dissatisfaction, feeling that none of the theories adequately captured the impact and importance of these special relationships. This recognition of a theoretical gap prompts the exploration of a conceptual model that goes beyond the existing frameworks. Instead of relying solely on established theories, the research suggests the need for a more integrative and comprehensive conceptual model that considers the intricate dynamics of the STR. This conceptual model should aim to capture the profound importance and impact of these relationships on students, teachers, and the broader school community, acknowledging the need for a nuanced understanding that transcends the limitations of existing theories.

Moving forward, the research calls for a more integrated approach that encompasses the themes underscored throughout the study: the significance of STR, acknowledgment of power imbalances inherent in relationships, and the critical importance of fostering a sense of security and protection within the STR. The conceptual model should emphasise the foundational role of relationship building, the importance of emotional well-being, the need for collaboration and social interaction, a student-centered approach, the dynamic and dialogical nature of the relationship, and cultural sensitivity.

Additionally, the model should incorporate findings from this research, recognising the importance of special, stand-out STR that acts as a protective factor for young people. It should also acknowledge power imbalances in relationships that can lead to feelings of unfairness and disempowerment. Furthermore, recognising the importance of a sense of security and protection in STR should be integral to the model. This evolving conceptualisation is an area that will require further thought and development, which I intend to pursue as part of my continued interest in the field of STR.

## Returning to the Research Questions (RQ)

***RQ1: What are the lived experiences of the STR for students attending mainstream secondary school?***

The findings from this research underscore the significance of nurturing a positive and secure Student-Teacher Relationships (STR) within this context. What struck me profoundly when delving into the data was the vast breadth and depth of experiences shared by the students, underscoring just how pivotal these relationships are in their lives. This significance becomes evident through the recurring themes that emerged, such as *"She means the world to me,"* the dynamics of power within the STR, and the fundamental sense of security and protection these relationships offer. What stands out most is the realisation that much of the existing theory and research on STR often falls short in acknowledging the intricate complexity and profound depth of these relationships, aspects that this research has successfully captured and illuminated. It underscores the unique and multi-dimensional nature of these experiences, shedding light on dimensions that prior research may have overlooked.

***RQ2: What can educationalists learn from the lived experiences of STR for secondary school students?***

The lived experiences of the Young People (YP) in this research highlight the importance of these relationships and how much they matter to them. It would be important for teachers to recognise they can make a difference to the YP they work with by spending time with them to create spaces where YP feel the relationship is special. The theme name *“she means the world to me”* can be used to highlight how the YP hold these relationships in great importance in their lives and can make a difference. Educationalists can learn students want to feel security and protection in their STR by building authentic, supportive, and emotionally connected relationships with them. These relationships go beyond academics, providing emotional support, trust, and a sense of significance. Consistency, authenticity, and individualised attention matter. Recognising the impact of these bonds can help teachers create a positive learning environment where students thrive. Educationalists can learn power imbalances exist in the STR, which can lead to feelings of disempowerment for YP. By following the recommendations below, educationists can learn how to better support students, address their needs, and create an environment that fosters meaningful connections and well-being.

***RQ3: What could policymakers learn from the lived experience of STR for secondary school students?***

The recommendations emphasise the importance of clear school policies, teacher development, classroom environments, and awareness of students' needs. These recommendations offer actionable insights for policymakers to develop policies and initiatives that enhance the educational experience by promoting secure and protective STRs. This includes allocating resources, providing teacher education, and creating an inclusive and supportive school culture.

In summary, the recommendations and points provided are directly related to addressing the research questions by offering practical guidance for educationists, policymakers, and other stakeholders to better understand, support, and enhance the lived experiences of STR in secondary school settings. The study's implications are specific to the school, and the school's SLT is keen to use the findings for policy and practice improvements. However, they contribute to the overall knowledge and awareness of the complex dynamics of STR and how they impact students' well-being and educational outcomes.

## Strengths of research

The research has notable strengths. While substantial theory and research emphasise STR's importance in education, a literature gap exists regarding secondary school students' experiences of STR. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how these students experience STR, not only to inform changes within a specific school but also to potentially influence educational policy and Educational Psychology (EP) practices. The primary strength lies in its innovative approach, which recognises the need for students to voice their perspectives in school settings, in line with Trotman et al., (2019). This study is significant as it is the first to focus on students in these year groups regarding their STR experiences, enhancing its relevance and potential contributions to the existing knowledge base.

The use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) underscores my commitment to a robust and systematic data collection and analysis process. IPA is well-regarded for its ability to delve deeply into participants' lived experiences, as noted by Willig (2013).

The research gathered a substantial amount of data and subjected it to rigorous analysis. The research findings are consistent with prior research on the importance of STR concerning well-being, mental health, and learning. This consistency allows for the potential theoretical transferability of the research findings, integrating them into existing literature, as suggested by Tindall et al. (2009).

Revisiting Yardley's (2015) 'Principles for Demonstrating Excellence in Qualitative Research,' my research brings an innovative and highly relevant perspective to the field, adding to its impact and importance. I employed an in-depth research methodology, spotlighting unique student perspectives to provide educators with direct insights. The literature review highlighted a significant gap in understanding young people's experiences in STR. In the introduction, I shared my personal connection to the topic as a teacher, motivated by the profound impact a teacher can have on a student's life. These personal insights, complemented by research findings, emphasise the study's relevance and practical significance. Focusing on STR holds practical value for EPs and education professionals. The research findings illuminate the vast expanse, profound depth, and rich diversity of YP experiences. It prompted me to reevaluate how past research has often oversimplified and crudely portrayed STR. These relationships have revealed a multifaceted and profound impact on YP, making it incredibly poignant to witness just how crucial they are in their lives.

In my research, I have demonstrated transparency by representing each research stage, ensuring the reader can trace the findings to the transcript data. I have offered a clear justification of my methodology, which aligns with my ontology, epistemology, and research aims.

I have demonstrated sensitivity to context, through careful consideration of the participants' experiences and perspectives. I've strived to be sensitive to the well-being and rights of the participants. This entails framing the participant group with care, maintaining a clear understanding of my role as a researcher, and ensuring that the findings are presented in a way that respects their experiences and continues to have a positive impact. I've demonstrated this sensitivity by establishing strong connections between theory and prior research in both the literature review and the discussion of findings. This approach serves to anchor the study within a broader context while respecting the richness of the participants' experiences.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was constrained due to the extensive time required for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). However, the research successfully gathered and analysed detailed data regarding young individuals' experiences with STR. It is essential to acknowledge that the experiences of these six participants are unique, limiting the generalisability of the findings, as noted by Tateo (2015).

Since this study primarily emphasises an idiographic approach rather than seeking an objective 'truth,' its findings may not readily apply to a larger student population. The interpretation of data was influenced by my experiences and efforts to make sense of the participants' lives. Different interviewers may have elicited more detailed narratives or different aspects from the participants, as meaning is co-constructed. While a smaller sample size may seem to affirm the ideographic core of IPA research, the objective here was not to conduct nomothetic research aimed at generalisability.

Throughout the analysis section, I carefully considered the convergence and divergence of the participants' experiences, creating an unfolding interpretive narrative supported by direct quotes from each individual. While the findings may not be broadly applicable to a larger group of students, this limitation aligns with the established premise of qualitative approaches, especially in the context of IPA (Larkin et al., 2021).

Within the framework of IPA investigations, which favour the double hermeneutic procedure as emphasised by Larkin et al. (2021), it's essential to acknowledge the interpretations derived from the interviews are inherently influenced by perspectives. Therefore, fully 'bracketing out' all personal preconceptions becomes an impossible task. I have grappled with 'bracketing' in relation to my own experiences and have noted some reflections in the reflective log (Appendix 1). IPA demanded my active participation during the process of interpretive analysis, despite sincere efforts to mitigate bias through reflective and reflexive practices and maintaining transparency.

To ensure transparency regarding the rigorous analytical process, examples illustrating the various stages of analysis have been included in the appendix. This inclusion provides insight into the steps taken during the interpretive journey, allowing readers to better understand the process and potential sources of influence on the interpretations.

Upon careful consideration, it becomes evident that 'member checking' can be challenging when using IPA. This challenge arises because my interpretation of the participants' experiences takes precedence, with no direct avenue to solicit the participants' feedback on the identified themes. Nevertheless, this is essentially the inherent purpose of IPA. Given more time or an opportunity to convey the findings to them, their insights could have enriched the research further. Furthermore, because this study represents an innovative approach, there is a clear need for additional research to deepen our understanding and gather more evidence of its practical application and feasibility.

When employing IPA, the focus revolves around what holds significance for the participants. It's important to acknowledge that one constraint to consider is the potential divergence in expectations and perceptions between the participants and myself. These differences in perspectives and expectations could introduce challenges, especially in managing the dynamics of this type of interview (Potter & Hepburn, 2005).

To address this potential challenge, I took steps to establish a connection with the participants and dedicated time to building rapport at the outset of the interview process. While I endeavoured to keep the interview questions as open-ended as possible, it's worth noting that the interview schedule might have inadvertently emphasised specific areas as I probed further based on the participants' responses.

In response to this concern, I maintained a research diary to reflect on each interview session. This practice revealed that with each interview, I became more adept at formulating questions in line with the IPA approach, thus minimising the risk of unintentional bias or influence on the participants' narratives.

## Reflections

During my journey with IPA, I've realised the pivotal role I play as an ‘interpretive tool’ in this research process. I must acknowledge I bring my own context and a unique perspective, especially regarding STR, stemming from my previous roles as both a teacher and a student. This positionality as an embodied human researcher inevitably introduces an element of bias, as my experiences, beliefs, and values saturate the research process.

Furthermore, as I conducted interviews and analysed the data, I became acutely aware of a co-construction taking place. It was impossible to separate myself from this process, as I brought my history and understanding to the table, making it challenging to escape the influence of my own subjectivity.

In contemplating the participants' responses, I also recognised their reactions during the interviews were influenced by their perception of me and their interpretation of my role and motivations in the research. Despite my best efforts to be transparent and provide them with a one-page profile outlining my background and intentions, they may have come into the interviews with preconceived notions about me. Their responses might have been filtered through the lens of what they believed I wanted to hear or my presumed expectations, given that I was an adult with a prior teaching background.

I also considered how the participants' responses might differ if they were discussing STR in a more casual, personal context, such as at home with a sibling or a friend. This reflection highlighted the potential for inherent bias in their responses based on the unique nature of the interview setting. Recognising these complexities and potential sources of bias, I navigated the research process with sensitivity and awareness, understanding the co-construction of meaning was a multifaceted and intricate endeavour.

This research upholds Yardley's (2015) principles of rigour and commitment as demonstrated by the connection between all Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) and Group Experiential Themes (GETs) to the quotes from the transcripts, exploring both individual and overarching themes in their experiences of STR. Rigorous tracking of these themes is supported by evidence in the appendices as well as a commitment to following the IPA methodology.

## Reflections of using IPA

Reflecting on my experience with the process of IPA, I find both significant benefits and limitations worth acknowledging. One notable advantage of IPA is its ability to provide an emotive and empathetic portrayal of participants' experiences, constructing a compelling narrative for each individual. The power of the quotes extracted during analysis left a lasting impact on me, fostering reflection and meaning-making throughout the write-up and analysis stages. A key strength lies in the transparency of results, grounded in the data, enhancing trustworthiness for readers who are invited to engage in the hermeneutic circle and make sense of both participant and researcher sense-making endeavours (Nizza et al., 2021).

However, the labour-intensive nature of IPA's analysis stage posed a notable challenge, necessitating adjustments to my research timelines. The interpretive cycle, crucial for nuanced analysis, required an iterative approach, leading to revisits of transcripts and earlier analysis stages. This commitment to exhaustive analysis, while essential for reaching saturation point, contributed to delays in thesis completion. In future research, I recognise the need to balance this depth of analysis with the practicalities of project timelines, especially when considering larger sample sizes and diverse age groups.

One limitation of my IPA methodology was the absence of ‘member checking’, a step I now recognise could have added value to the research. Going back to participants for a post-analysis discussion could have validated interpretations and explored further the sense-making that occurred during and after the interviews. Although not conventionally part of IPA, member checking aligns with the ethos of rigour and could enhance the study's credibility.

Another consideration that surfaced during the research was the tension surrounding the notion of a homogenous participant group. The challenge of labelling and categorising young people within the school cohort prompted deliberation. Upon reflection, I question the true homogeneity of my group, as the inclusion criteria, framed as receiving *'additional to and different from provision for behaviour'* and being on the schools Special Educational Needs register for Social, Emotional, and Mental Health needs, remained broad. I reflected that future research endeavours should carefully navigate the balance between homogeneity and heterogeneity, ensuring coherence with research aims and open resources.

In conclusion, while IPA offered a rich and insightful exploration of participants' experiences, its demands and limitations influenced the trajectory of my research. Balancing the depth of analysis with practical timelines, considering member checking, and critically assessing the homogeneity of participant groups are areas for refinement in future research endeavours.

## Barriers to relational practice and the role of the educational psychologist

Overcoming barriers to the adoption of relational practices in schools necessitates a comprehensive approach, acknowledging potential challenges and fostering systemic change. One notable barrier may stem from the perception of a 'within-teacher' position, where blame for challenges in developing positive student-teacher relationships is solely attributed to teachers. Addressing this barrier requires recognising the need for teachers to operate within an empathetic and supportive environment in line with findings from Fitzsimmons (2021).

A crucial aspect of dismantling these barriers involves systemic changes within schools. Members of senior leadership in schools should revise policies to offer practical guidance, promoting the creation of a classroom environment conducive to positive student-teacher relationships. This could include explicit examples of power-sharing dynamics in the classroom and descriptions of what characterises an environment of 'security and protection.'

Additionally, a shift in mindset at the systemic level involves prioritising training linked to key theories and research on student-teacher relationships. This training not only emphasises the profound impact of such relationships on student’s lives but also empowers teachers to recognise their role in influencing positive change. Building confidence among teachers contributes to the overall effectiveness of relational practices.

Educational Psychologists (EPs) play a vital role in supporting schools systemically this could be done through offering training linked to key theories and research. EPs have skills that can support schools to engage in systemic consultation to enhance student-teacher relationships. For instance, employing approaches like appreciative inquiry can guide schools in adopting positive and collaborative techniques for leadership and organisational change related to student-teacher relationships. The expertise of EPs in consultation and systemic psychology positions them well to provide valuable support in this regard.

To amplify student voice, participation, and shared power, schools can turn to frameworks such as Lundy's (2007) model. This model, encompassing components like Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, has gained global recognition and adoption. It serves as a catalyst for redefining child participation, encouraging a paradigm shift in integrating child rights-based participation into both policy and practice. By embracing these frameworks, schools can remove barriers, and create environments that genuinely prioritise the voices of young people, fostering a culture of participation and shared power.

## Recommendations

These recommendations outline strategies through which teachers can cultivate ‘special STR’:

Inclusive classrooms benefit from the integral role of Educational Psychologists in translating research into actionable strategies, emphasising the profound connection between STR and inclusiveness, as highlighted by Weare (2015). Recognising the protective factor of special STR, schools should create relational spaces, enhance teacher availability, and ensure consistency in interactions with secondary school students, addressing current system gaps (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Wilkins, 2014).

To foster positive STR, educational institutions can promote care, warmth, and empathy, encouraging educators to engage in interactive experiences with students for meaningful connections. Simultaneously, strategies should be implemented to nurture a sense of school community, instilling a feeling of belonging within classrooms and the overall school environment. Prioritising time and space for young people to express themselves and empowering educators with emotional connection skills are crucial steps in building relationships that enhance the educational experience for students.

The ethos of the school should acknowledge and address power imbalances in relationships in the following ways:

School ethos for addressing power imbalances in STR, particularly concerning sanctions, is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment. Proactive measures must be implemented to ensure students' voices are not only heard but also valued. This involves mitigating power imbalances through clear school policies that emphasise the importance of fair and respectful STR. Providing opportunities for young people to express themselves within these relationships is essential, with school policies outlining methods to share power and recognise children's rights and agency. Empowering students in decision-making processes and employing participatory frameworks like Hart's (2008) Ladder of Participation fosters a sense of agency. Additionally, embracing restorative practices and critically examining teacher language using reflective questions can repair strained relationships. Adopting models like Lundy's (2007) framework, encompassing Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence, allows schools to amplify student voices, encouraging a paradigm shift towards child rights-based participation in both policy and practice, ultimately creating environments that prioritise young people's voices and foster a culture of shared power.

To improve feelings of security and protection the recommendations are:

Clear and supportive school policies play a pivotal role in enhancing security and protection in educational environments, emphasising the importance of nurturing spaces for YP and actively involving teachers and students. Continuous professional development programs are essential for teachers to appreciate the positive influence of secure and protective strong STR on educational outcomes. Striking a balance between creating a secure environment and encouraging students' independence is crucial for their growth, emphasising a sense of partnership between students and teachers. Addressing the lack of emotional security and teacher empathy through awareness and support is vital for effective resolution, with school leaders recognising the challenges teachers face in nurturing positive relationships. Mitigating unpredictability and uncertainty in STR requires empathy, active listening, and respect, fostering a nurturing atmosphere that improves the overall educational experience. Additionally, incorporating a greater focus on STR theory in initial teacher education and involving Educational Psychologist services in ongoing dialogue about YPs' experiences with STR can further enhance support and understanding, particularly in unique local, regional, or sociocultural settings.

## Future research directions

Future research endeavours should aim to enhance the robustness of the findings by employing larger sample sizes, while also taking into consideration homogeneous inclusion criteria. By expanding the pool of participants to encompass a more diverse range of students, factors contributing to successful STR, and its sustainability can be examined among students of varying ages, genders, and ethnic backgrounds.

Furthermore, it would be advantageous to conduct additional IPA research utilising a purposeful sample of students drawn from secondary schools of differing sizes and geographical locations. This approach would not only contribute to a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the subject but also has the potential to identify novel areas of investigation within this field, rather than merely building upon existing research.

## Chapter summary

In conclusion, this research, anchored in IPA, has uncovered the profound and intricate lived experiences of secondary school students within STR. The findings, addressing the research questions and underscored by robust methodological choices, emphasise the pivotal role of positive and secure STR in students' lives. The study contributes to existing literature by filling a notable gap in understanding the nuanced dynamics of STR for secondary school students. Recommendations derived from the research provide practical insights for educators, policymakers, and educational psychologists, emphasising the need for systemic changes, teacher training, and inclusive practices. Despite the study's strengths, including its innovative approach and commitment to IPA methodology, limitations such as difficulties with identifying a homogenous group, constrained sample size and inherent biases are acknowledged. The conclusions highlight the significance of fostering inclusive classrooms, addressing power imbalances, and prioritising security and protection within STR. Finally, future research directions propose expanding sample sizes and exploring diverse student backgrounds to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding in this critical area.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1: Reflective log examples

**Reflective log 1:** This statement by Jess allowed me to reflect on my own experiences of being a secondary high school teacher and how unaware I was that students might be experiencing such difficult internal struggles that are created for the YP within the small decisions and actions of the teacher. It made me think back to the YP I taught and how I may have misinterpreted their behaviours, as I hadn’t thought about how my actions could have been experienced by a student. I don’t think I had the ‘space in my mind’ for the student. This prompted me to look at approaches that would encourage teachers to consider things from a student’s perspective. I took a closer look at ‘mentalising’. “Mentalising is the ability to perceive and comprehend oneself and others in terms of mental states (emotions, beliefs, intentions, and desires)” (Fonagy et al. 1998, p.6). Mentalising is said to promote secure relationships (Fonagy et al., 1998; Sadler et al., 2006) and can promote coregulation by helping children understand their emotions by responding to and reflecting them to them. It is a concept connected to and intertwined with empathy (particularly cognitive empathy). One possible action point for schools and teachers could be to use an approach such as mentalising to promote active thinking around the students to better understand their experiences thus encouraging more thoughtful interactions towards relational approaches in schools.

**Reflective log 2:** JJ’s comment made me reflect on the process of exclusion within a power, threat, and meaning framework (BPS, 2018) and the act of school exclusion through a ‘relational' lens. The act of exclusion can be considered a 'relational threat’ due to the disrupted attachments between students and teachers and a sense of abandonment, betrayal, isolation, shaming, or humiliation from the act of exclusion. I feel this fits well with JJ’s example, as it leads him to feel powerless and hopeless in the situation.

**Reflective log 3- bracketing and my experiences**

As a researcher, I found it challenging to completely set aside my personal experiences and biases related to student-teacher relationships. I recognised that my prior experiences as a student, a teacher, and a parent significantly shaped my perspective on this topic and I viewed myself as the interpretive tool during this research. As a child, I had a particularly positive experience with a teacher who was exceptionally supportive and caring, and this undoubtedly influenced my belief in the significance of strong student-teacher relationships.

During my time as a teacher, I encountered various challenges in building these relationships with my students, which further piqued my interest in the subject. Additionally, witnessing my own son's struggles to connect with his teacher prompted me to explore this topic more deeply. These experiences provided me with valuable insights into the complexities of student-teacher relationships, but they also presented a potential bias in my analysis.

To address this, I decided to follow the approach suggested by Larkin et al. (2006). Rather than attempting to completely eliminate my personal knowledge and presumptions, I embraced them as a valuable part of the data interpretation process. By acknowledging my unique perspective and the impact of my experiences, I aimed to ensure that my research remained transparent and self-aware. This approach allowed me to incorporate my personal insights into my analysis while maintaining a commitment to objectivity and integrity in my research.

To maintain a reflective and transparent approach I maintained a high level of self-awareness during the research, which is important to maintaining the credibility and validity of the study which allowed me to manage potential biases.

**Reflective log 4- Reflective Log:**

During the course of my research journey, I found myself grappling with the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin the study. It was crucial for me to critically examine these positions to ensure that they aligned with the essence of my research. While considering various perspectives, I contemplated both critical realism and social constructivism, but ultimately, I have chosen an interpretive phenomenological approach as my ontological and epistemological position for this research. Here are my reasons for this choice and why it differs from critical realism and social constructivism:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Critical Realism | Social Constructionism |
| Critical realism posits that there is an underlying reality, although we may not fully comprehend it, and our understanding is limited. Researchers adhering to critical realism do not believe in a complete separation between themselves and the subject of study. They aim for objectivity but acknowledge their influence on interpretation. However, they do not seek an ultimate truth, but rather emphasise how historical and cultural factors shape our perception of reality. While I appreciate the nuanced perspective of critical realism, I differ in that I do not believe in the existence of an ultimate truth to be discovered in my research. | Social constructionism challenges the notion of uncovering a single, unchanging truth about reality. It posits that reality is flexible and ever-changing, shaped by language, relationships, and cultural context. Social constructionists see knowledge as a product of social interactions, emphasising how our views of reality are constructed by society and language. While I acknowledge the value of this perspective in understanding the role of language and social interactions in shaping our perception of reality, I found that it did not entirely align with my research aims. |

## Appendix 2: Reflective and reflexive questions

1. What is the essence of the experience?

- What are participants describing as the core of their experience?

- What seems most salient or meaningful to them?

2. What are the participants' lived experiences?

- How do participants describe their experiences in their own words?

- What is the context in which these experiences occurred?

3. How do participants make sense of their experiences?

- What meaning or interpretations do participants attribute to their experiences?

- Are there underlying beliefs or values that shape their understanding?

4. What emotions and affective responses are present?

- How do participants express their feelings and emotions about their experiences?

- How do these emotions influence their perceptions and actions?

5. \*\*What are the key themes and patterns in the data?

- What recurrent themes or patterns emerge as you analyse the transcripts?

- Are there commonalities or differences in participants' experiences?

6. What are the individual variations and uniqueness among participants?

- How do participants' experiences differ from one another?

- Are there distinct features or contexts that set each participant apart?

7. What are the challenges, contradictions, or ambiguities in the data?

- Are there conflicting or contradictory elements in participants' accounts?

- How do participants navigate and make sense of these challenges?

8. What external factors or context influence the experiences?

- What external factors or contexts are mentioned by participants that impact their experiences?

- How do these external elements intersect with their personal experiences?

9. What implications and insights can be drawn from the analysis?

- What can we learn from participants' experiences that may have broader implications?

- How might these insights inform our understanding of the phenomenon under investigation?

10. What questions or ambiguities remain unanswered?

- Are there aspects of the data that require further exploration or clarification?

- What questions or areas of uncertainty persist in your analysis?

## Appendix 3: Ethics application

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## Appendix 4: Ethics approval letter



## Appendix 5: School information sheet

**Research information sheet for participating school**

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## Appendix 6: Parent/ carer information sheet

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A close-up of a paper

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## Appendix 7: Student information sheet

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## Appendix 8: School consent form

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A close-up of a questionnaire

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## Appendix 9: Parent/Carer consent form

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## Appendix 10: Student consent form

A questionnaire with text and a check box

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## Appendix 11: About me profile

A white board with a couple of images

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## Appendix 12: Email sent to schools

Dear xxxx

**Your school is invited to take part in a research project**

My name is Emily Forde, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Sheffield currently on placement in Kirklees.

I am conducting research that aims to explore students’ experiences of student-teacher relationships in one mainstream secondary high school.

* I require one school to take part in the research.
* I am hoping to interview 4-6 students in years 9 and 10.

 I have focused on this area because there is evidence that the student-teacher relationship fundamentally impacts educational experiences. As well as this, research indicates that effective student-teacher relationships can support young people to reduce disruptive behaviour in school, reduce exclusions, improve attainment, and progress, and improve wellbeing.

I hope this research will add to the current discussion of relational practice and policy in schools and help educationalists learn from viewing relationships through a young person’s lens. The research aims to gain an understanding of the richness of student experiences by enabling the voice and perspective of the students.

 I hope to carry out this research in the first half of the Autumn term, so I may send a reminder email in September.

Please reply to this email if you would like further information or feel free to get in touch if you have any questions regarding the research.

Kind regards

Emily Forde

[Eforde2@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:Eforde2@sheffield.ac.uk)

Trainee Educational Psychologist,

The University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, S10 2TN, 0114 222 2000

## Appendix 13: IPA method overview

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## Appendix 14: Overview of participants

*Table 5: Participant overview*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym | Year group | Gender | Reflections following interview |
| John | 10 | Male | John was the first participant I interviewed. His interview lasted a little less than 25 minutes in total. When John was speaking, he seemed confident and interesting, and I held the perception that he had a refreshing wit and humour, which helped the interview run smoothly. I feel that John shared his experiences of his relationship with one teacher at school and that this relationship had significance and purpose for him even in trying circumstances. I say this because I got the impression that John thought highly of his relationship with this teacher. There were instances when John provided shorter responses, which meant that I felt I needed to provide some suggestions to investigate the interview questions in greater depth. John was able to provide instances that linked to experiences, bringing depth and richness to his account. |
| JJ | 10 | Male | JJ was the second participant that I spoke with as part of the interviews. The entirety of his interview ran for a little under thirty minutes in total. When JJ talked about his experiences, I had the impression that he was engaging, interesting, and humorous. JJ appeared to feel strongly about the significance of having a positive STR, which should include the teacher’s understanding of inclusion. When JJ discussed his thoughts of injustice and unfairness within STR, he did it with a great deal of passion. He was able to demonstrate his capacity for reflection by giving useful examples drawn from his experiences and by being able to conduct in-depth analyses of those experiences. |
| Sarah | 10 | Female | Sarah spoke in depth about her experiences of relationships with her teachers, which focused on contrast in her experiences with both negative and positive examples. Sarah provided a clear and unwavering perspective on positive STR, as well as shared ways in which this may be accomplished by other educators. When Sarah spoke, she did so in a manner that was in-depth and included a great deal of detail. I had the impression that Sarah was quite confident in her abilities to convey her thoughts, feelings, and the most important parts of her experiences with STR. Sarah talked readily about her experiences, which made it possible for me to investigate and pursue specific crucial areas relating to the research questions. |
| Jess | 9 | Female | The interview that I had with Jess lasted for 41 minutes. Jess was articulate, displayed deliberate consideration in her comments, and reacted with self-assurance. Jess gave a lengthy response linking to one positive STR that has affected the way she views her education. Jess often spoke about the close bonds she shared with each of her teachers. Through her thoughtful comments, Jess provided me with a lot of thought. Jess gave me the impression that she was comfortable conversing with me and was able to give some in-depth responses to the key areas that I brought to her, with little need for me to prompt her. Jess seemed highly reflective about some of her experiences at school, which are central to the findings of this research. |
| Ben | 10 | Male | It was a pleasure to speak with Ben, as his delivery of responses during the interview was animated and engaging to listen to. Quickly into the interview, he built up a good rapport and engaged well when responding to the interview questions. Ben was able to speak for 43 minutes; from this, there was a large amount of data as he talked quickly at times. Ben offered a mix of shorter responses but some in-depth ones when he was into the flow of explaining his experiences. Ben exhibited a high level of engagement in conversation and showed a reflective approach while discussing his experiences. |
| Rebecca | 9 | Female | Rebecca conducted the longest interview, lasting 44 minutes. Initially, she gave shorter answers, so I had to encourage her to extend them. After this, Rebecca seemed more secure in her comments as the interview progressed and gave longer answers, which gave the data more depth and richness. Rebecca talked warmly about one particular relationship that stood out and had a great effect on her time in school. Rebecca shared thoughtful reflections about her experiences, which left me with a lot to consider. When Rebecca was speaking, she was animated and engaging. |

## Appendix 15: Transcript example

A paper with text on it

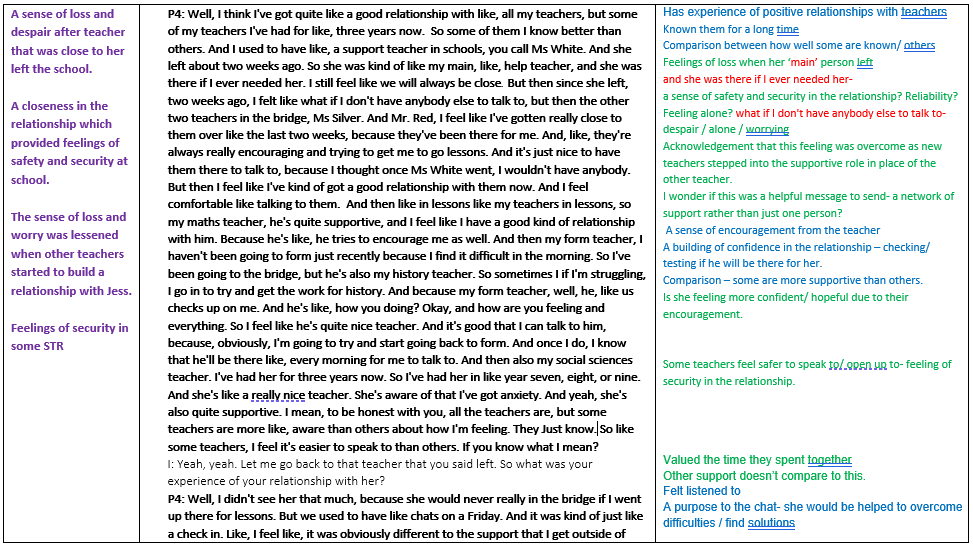
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## Appendix 16: Example of stage 2 IPA

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## Appendix 17: Example of stage 3 IPA



## Appendix 18: Example of PETS

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## Appendix 19: Example of exploring experiential statements

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## Appendix 20: Example of the GETS

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## Appendix 21: Critical review of theories

*Table 6: Critical review of theories*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Attachment Theory** | **Sociocultural Theory** | **Humanist Theory** | **Self-Determination Theory** | **Relational Theory** | **Relatedness Theory** |
| **Information** | Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988) | Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978) | Humanist Principles (Carl Rogers, 1951, 1979) | Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2004)  . | Gergen's Relational Theory (Gergen, 2009): | Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness |
| **Variable** | Student and teacher attachment styles.  Emotional bonds and impacts on relationships. | Social interaction as a catalyst for learning.  Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizing student-teacher collaboration | Importance of empathy, understanding, warmth, and sincerity.  Humanistic values of honesty, justice, care, and respect. | Autonomy, competence, and relatedness as psychological needs.  Positive impact on academic performance and engagement | Relational process as dynamic interplay.  Reciprocal influence, negotiation, and co-construction of meaning. | Teacher involvement and emotional support.  Cultivation of a perception of affiliation and interconnectedness. |
| **Relationship** | Secure attachment leading to trust and responsiveness. | Social interaction as a source of society and culture.  Collaborative learning in ZPD. | Teacher as a learning facilitator in a caring environment. | Fulfillment of fundamental psychological needs through teacher-student interactions. | STR as a co-constructed entity shaped by ongoing interactions. | Expressing care for students' well-being.  Providing emotional support and ensuring personal safety. |
| **Mechanism** | Impact of early attachment on emotional health and future relationships.  Theoretical emphasis on comfort and security seeking. | Learning as both inter-psychological and intra-psychological.  Impact of social interaction on cognitive development. | Seeing the world through the eyes of students.  Promoting diversity and individual culture. | Correlation between autonomy, competence, and relatedness and academic success.  The role of relatedness in intrinsic motivation. | Emphasis on dialogical approach.  Active contribution to building shared understanding. | Development of a constructive self-concept and aspirational goals.  Improved motivational aspects such as self-efficacy, intrinsic value, and academic aspirations. |
| **Interaction** | Attachment theory influences the emotional foundation of the relationship. | Sociocultural theory emphasises the collaborative learning process. | Humanist principles guide teacher-student interactions based on empathy and respect. | Self-Determination Theory highlights the importance of fulfilling psychological needs. | Gergen's relational theory encourages a dialogical and co-constructed understanding. | Wentzel's theory of relatedness focuses on teacher involvement, emotional support, and the cultivation of a positive self-concept. |
| **Outcome** | Positive emotional well-being and secure attachment from Attachment Theory. | Collaborative and culturally sensitive learning environments influenced by Sociocultural Theory | Student adjustment and growth through Humanist Principles. | Enhanced motivation and academic success from Self-Determination Theory. | Improved motivational aspects and positive outcomes from Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness. | Improved motivational aspects and positive outcomes from Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness. |

Variables: Aspects or factors that can vary and have an impact on the student-teacher relationship within the framework of attachment theory.

Relationships: The nature and characteristics of the bond formed between students and teachers based on attachment styles.

Mechanisms: The underlying processes and dynamics that explain how attachment influences emotional health and future relationships.

Interaction: This section emphasizes the interconnectedness and collaborative aspects among the various psychological theories discussed

Outcome : This section focuses on the expected results or impacts of applying the theories to student-teacher relationships.

## Appendix 22: Overlapping facets of theories

*Table 7: Overlapping facets of theories*

|  |
| --- |
| **Overlapping facets of the theories** |
| This table summarises the key themes and emphases of each theory in different aspects of student-teacher relationships. |
| Emphasise the importance of relationships in education |
| All theories  All theories emphasise the importance of relationships in the educational context. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness further stress the role of supportive relationships in fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. |
| Emphasis on Emotional Well-being |
| * Attachment theory * Humanistic principles * Self-Determination Theory (SDT) * Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness   Attachment theory, humanistic principles, SDT, and Wentzel's theory all recognize the importance of emotional connections for overall well-being and motivation. SDT, in particular, emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs. |
| Collaboration and Social Interaction |
| * Sociocultural theory * Relational theory * SDT   Sociocultural theory, relational theory, and SDT all highlight the significance of collaboration and social interaction. SDT emphasises the role of relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. |
| Student-Centered Approach |
| * Humanistic principles * Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory * SDT   Humanistic principles, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and SDT promote a student-centered approach. SDT specifically underscores the importance of autonomy and competence, aligning with humanistic principles and Vygotsky's emphasis on the ZPD. |
| Dynamic and Dialogical Nature: |
| * Relational theory * Humanistic principles * SDT   Relational theory, humanistic principles, and aspects of SDT emphasise the dynamic and dialogical nature of the teacher-student relationship. SDT's focus on autonomy aligns with the dialogical approach, emphasising the importance of choice and self-regulation. |
| Cultural Sensitivity |
| * Sociocultural theory * Relational theory * SDT   Sociocultural theory, relational theory, and SDT consider cultural factors. SDT, while not explicitly focusing on cultural aspects, recognises the importance of the socio-cultural context in supporting autonomy and relatedness. |
| Intrinsic Motivation and Autonomy |
| * SDT   SDT uniquely contributes by emphasising intrinsic motivation and the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering a sense of volition and engagement in learning. |
| Relatedness |
| * Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness   Wentzel's Theory of Relatedness contributes by emphasising the importance of positive social connections, peer relationships, and teacher-student relationships in academic motivation and achievement. |