

PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AMONG FULL-DAY  
KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN RELATION TO THE ACHIEVEMENT OF  
STUDENTS OF POVERTY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

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## AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT DISSERTATION

This dissertation of Lisa Nolan, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education with a major in Educational Leadership and titled "Perceptions of the Teacher-Student Relationship Among Full-Day Kindergarten Teachers in Relation to the Achievement of Students of Poverty: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study," has been reviewed in final form.

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## DEDICATION

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## ABSTRACT

When considering closing the achievement gap, full-day kindergarten (FDK) is a viable contender. The implementation of specific teacher strategies enhances the FDK experience and elicit gains among the students. The literature clearly articulates a strong correlation between poverty and poor achievement and supports the notion that the relationship between the teacher and student is a positive factor in closing the achievement gap (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Duchaine, Jolivette, & Fredrick, 2011; Guo & Harris, 2000; Lee, 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pigford, 2001; Silva et al., 2011; Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010). However, the research is insufficient when it comes to digging deep into teacher perceptions regarding the importance of the relationship that exists between the teacher and the student. The foundation for which this study is built stems from John Bowlby's attachment theory and emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the child and adult. This study provides profound insight into the perceptions of FDK teachers and the strategies, or concepts they believe have the greatest influence on student achievement among students of poverty. The qualitative phenomenological study revealed intimate and personal thoughts of nine FDK teachers discovered through the coding and analysis of 18 semi-structured interview transcripts. Substantial findings exposed four themes with great clarity and obvious patterns. The themes in order of the greatest number of responses to the least, are: classroom atmosphere, instructional strategies, student management, and the relationship between the teacher and the student.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Schools have struggled for years to identify ways to close the opportunity gap. Oftentimes, students of poverty enter the school system demonstrating a deficit in their academic skills and ability to learn at a pace equal to that of their affluent peers. It becomes necessary for students to gain more than one year's growth at the onset of their educational careers. If this rigorous rate of growth is not attained, the gap widens and the following year requires even more growth (Becker, 2011; Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Fielding, Kerr, & Rosier, 2007). This is the beginning of a cycle that perpetuates through time and becomes nearly impossible to address properly in later years. This is important to note, as future academic and life success in many ways is contingent upon the early learning experience.

The home environment can greatly influence a child's ability to academically succeed. Children of poverty often experience various disadvantages that can leave them unprepared for entering the formal learning environment (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010). Family dynamics can affect a child's capability to be academically successful and can be disruptive to learning opportunities. Crosnoe and Cooper (2010) proposed that by modifying income disparities and incorporating school involvement into the dynamic of the family, outcomes can be altered and behaviors changed into those that promote academic achievement.

According to Callaghan and Madelaine (2012), longitudinal studies have shown the achievement gap between children of poverty and the advantaged can be traced back as early as kindergarten. Typically, students of poverty entering the school system are behind academically and have a more challenging time developing and attaining the necessary literacy skills, which leads to future reading difficulties and low academic performance (Callaghan & Madelaine,

2012; Griffith, Kimmel, & Biscoe, 2011). Children who enter kindergarten without certain reading skills continue to face literacy failure in subsequent grades. There is a need indicated for early literacy intervention planning (Bingham & Patton-Terry, 2013; Engle & Black, 2008). Academic success is dependent on providing children of poverty with the tools to achieve academic success, which include phonological awareness, letter recognition, and verbal language comprehension. Children who possess adequate phonological awareness skills learned at preschool age will be more likely to become proficient readers (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Griffith et al., 2011).

This research study investigated a critical component that may have a profound influence over increased academic achievement in the lives of young learners. Specifically, this study investigated the role of teacher strategies in a full-day kindergarten (FDK) setting and the relationship those strategies have to augmenting reading achievement in the lives of students who maintain the vulnerable status known as a *student of poverty*. These are the overt strategies that a teacher implements to elicit student engagement and solidify understanding. This includes examining the importance of a teacher meeting the basic needs of the students through nurturing, responsiveness, and personable and specialized interaction. This is an examination of behaviors that demonstrate a positive cultivation of the teacher–student relationship. Information gleaned from individual interviews with teachers provided substantial inquiry-based, qualitative data related to this phenomenon.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Poverty is a global issue that thrusts itself onto the doorsteps of American families nationwide. Evidence of this is found in the U.S. Census Bureau report indicating that 46.5 million people in the United States are living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Research

has repeatedly conveyed the startling message that poverty has a profoundly negative impact on student achievement (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Hilferty, Redmond, & Katz, 2010; Institute of Education Services, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Equally important, research has supported the notion that students of poverty entering the school system at kindergarten age enter with an academic deficit (Becker, 2011).

An additional visible concern is the notion that poverty has an adverse effect on student achievement (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Abelev (2009) suggests that children who are born into poverty start their lives at a disadvantage due to exposure to factors such as negative parenting, community components involving crime and drug-use, as well as the likelihood of attending high-poverty schools with low-performing peers. An alarming consequence of entering school as a child of poverty is an achievement gap or opportunity gap, as it is clear that poverty negatively impacts student school readiness and student achievement (Fielding et al., 2007). Research in the United States and Australia over the past 20 years has indicated that childhood poverty has consistently been linked with unsuited intellectual, verbal, and behavioral outcomes (Hilferty et al., 2010).

Currently, these strategies and concepts are studied in isolation and not within a FDK setting. Examining the practices, individually, helped to answer this study's research question, which included the role of teacher strategies or concepts and their ability to yield positive academic results.

## **Background**

O'Hare (2009) studied the differences in childhood poverty proportions in urban and rural counties in the United States. Childhood poverty is understood to have longitudinal consequences that spread into adulthood and infiltrate poverty within communities (Engle & Black, 2008; Griffith et al., 2011; Guo & Harris, 2000). There is a substantial need to monitor childhood poverty due to the more than \$500 million a year that is used to combat poverty. According to O'Hare (2009), poverty is "the most telling single indicator of child well-being. By almost every measure including health, cognitive development, educational outcomes, and emotional difficulties, children in low-income families are at higher risk than those in families with higher incomes" (p. 3).

Research strongly supports the notion that poverty has an adverse effect on student achievement and this support brings with it longitudinal merit. (Addy & Wight, 2012; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Hilferty et al., 2010; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005; Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, & Nelson, 2010). Engle and Black (2008) pointed out the disparity that exists with children of poverty by highlighting the impact on a child's cognitive development and academic achievement. Poverty has typically referred to monetary disparities; however, research has shown that it can affect many areas of life, including family, health, self-esteem and worth, and access to quality education (Engle & Black, 2008). Limited access to education and other resources may affect children's ability to adapt to their environment and can limit opportunities. One way in which schools can combat the negative effects of childhood poverty is by implementing programs such as Early Head Start, which encourage familial involvement, increased attention to health care, and exposure to learning opportunities (Bingham

& Patton-Terry, 2013; Engle & Black, 2008). This study would like to extend that same notion to the need for a FDK setting.

Gassman-Pines and Yoshikawa (2006) provided a rationale for how multiple risks associated with poverty can affect the developmental outcomes for children of low-socioeconomic backgrounds. They examined whether programs designed to combat these poverty-related risks are effective at reducing the amount of risk a child is exposed to. Research has revealed programs that are developed to reduce poverty by increasing income can be effective in eliminating these risks, and in turn, may produce results that help to close the achievement gap (Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006).

Guo and Harris (2000) highlighted the influence of poverty on cognitive development and emotional well-being. The authors stated,

Childhood poverty is correlated with dropping out of school, low academic achievement, teenage pregnancy, and childbearing, poor mental and physical health, delinquent behavior, and unemployment in adolescence and early adulthood. The longer children live in poverty, the lower their educational achievement and the worse their social and emotional functioning (p. 431).

Guo and Harris (2000) examined how indirect factors, such as physical environment, intellectual stimulus in the home, access to health care, parenting approach, and outreach to quality child care can mediate the disadvantages experienced by impoverished children.

Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013) studied the longitudinal effects of the Early Reading First (ERF) program on children's academic success. Programs such as ERF were created in response to research on the growing achievement gap between disadvantaged children and the advantaged. ERF is intended to provide teachers from programs, such as Head Start, the



resources to increase early literacy skills to ensure future academic achievement. According to Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013), there is a significant relationship between early literacy skills and future success. Children who lack literacy skills may experience increased difficulty as compared to children who possess these skills. Preschool is a critical time for learning because the achievement gap is narrowed. Early intervention can help disadvantaged children develop necessary language and literacy comprehensions that are critical for future reading success. Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013) found that when ERF teachers were professionally trained and equipped with effective strategies and curriculum, student literacy skills can be improved and the achievement gap narrowed. These effects were observed to continue through kindergarten and first grade.

This study proposed that the public school system can influence the disadvantaged student through the assurance of an FDK opportunity combined with highly effective teacher strategies. This naturally leads to a demonstrated need for FDK. Fielding et al. (2007) discuss their own experience in working with a school of high poverty, high diversity, and low-achievement scores. Fielding et al. (2007) shared the Kennewick School District's model that yielded high levels of student growth and achievement. It accounted for things that did work and did not work while striving toward the common goal of 90% of students meeting the benchmark in reading. A common finding for what worked was kindergarten expansion (Fielding et al., 2007). In an effort to realize this need as a must, it is important to fully understand the background of the impact poverty has on young children in relation to their ability to be properly prepared for the school setting.

As we continue to identify the necessary elements to closing the achievement gap, the role of the teacher-student relationship must be studied. Silva et al. (2011) examined the

influence of both emotional school engagement, which denotes a student's capacity to form connections and relationships within their schools, and student's effortful control, or attitudes about school, on the student's ability to academically achieve. Developing early positive attitudes surrounding school along with the development of teacher-student relationships can influence a child's academic success (Silva et al., 2011).

British child psychologist, John Bowlby (1988) professed that attachment is a deep connectedness between human beings and it is this concept that serves as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship developed between a mother and child and emphasizes the profound implication for developing other future relationships. Bowlby (1988) shares that attachment behavior can be described as a behavior that result in a person attaining closeness to another individual who is perceived as more equipped to cope with the environment. Teacher-student relationships are one way in which students can develop necessary attachments with an authority figure from which they can model positive behaviors and begins the foundation for the theoretical framework of this study.

### **Research Question**

Implementing effective teacher practices requires knowing what those practices are and understanding them deeply for the highest level of implementation (Jensen, 2008; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Tomlinson, 2015). The literature review provides a deep understanding of those strategies that are deemed effective for augmenting student achievement. The gap in the professional literature demonstrates a need for continued research in the area of the perceptions of full-day kindergarten students regarding the role of teacher-student relationships and its role in augmenting student achievement among students of poverty.

Ultimately, the examination of the individual practices helped to identify this study's research question.

An initial goal of this study was to synthesize findings of the literature review to determine viable concepts that positively influence achievement for students of poverty in a FDK setting. This construct led to a confirmation of information this researcher already believed to be true, and the need arose to discover a phenomenon for which neither this researcher nor the literature seemed to have the answer. The necessity to understand about perceptions was unveiled. The central research question for this study is the following:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

### **Description of Terms**

Continuous changes in education reform and ever intensifying information available for educators and their students make it important to establish a clear understanding of terminology employed in this study. Describing and labeling terms cultivate clarity in a research study (Creswell, 2014).

**Approaches to learning (ATL).** This term refers to a child's persistence, regulation of emotions, diligence, flexibility, and organization (Li-Grining, Votruba-Drzal, Maldonado-Carreño, & Haas, 2010).

**Behavior-specific praise statements (BSPS).** One form of positive feedback that is specific (Duchaine et al., 2011).

**Children of poverty.** Addy and Wight (2012) shared information about children of poverty from the National Center for Children in Poverty. First of all, it was pointed out that the total population includes 24% children. Yet, when one examines people in poverty, it is discovered

that children represent 34% of individuals in that category. Among all children, 21% live in poor families, whereas 44% live in low-income families. Children under age 3 represent an alarming 48% of children dwelling in families of low income, with 25% living in underprivileged families. On the other end of the spectrum, 40% of children ages 12 through 17 years live with families of low income (Addy & Wight, 2012).

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS).** A set of college and career standards for students in kindergarten through 12th grade developed by teachers and standard experts across the country. The standards were launched in 2009 by state leaders, including governors and state commissioners. As of June 2014, 43 states, Washington DC, Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and the U.S. Virgin Islands had adopted CCSS in English Language Arts (ELA) and math. The 2014–2015 school year marked the year for participating states to implement the Common Core State Standards [CCSS], 2015).

**Early Reading First (ERF).** According to Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013), ERF was intended to close the achievement gap with first graders in the public school setting.

**English Language Learners (ELL).** Students who do not speak English as their first language.

**Full-day kindergarten (FDK).** This learning opportunity is an all-day experience that mirrors the other grade levels within the elementary school (Cooper, Batts, Patall, & Dent, 2010).

**Half-day kindergarten.** This learning opportunity is half the schedule of the school day when compared to the other grade levels within the elementary school (Cooper et al., 2010).

**School readiness.** Ackerman and Barnett (2005) defined school readiness as “a child’s skills, behaviors, or attributes in relation to the expectations of individual classrooms or schools” (p. 5).

**Socioeconomic status.** The combination of work experience, income, and social relation when compared to others (Becker, 2011).

**Spell Out (TSRQ).** Measured teacher–student relationship quality from a large, diverse sample of teachers and students using self-report techniques (Wu et al., 2010).

### **Significance of the Study**

Research clearly articulates a strong correlation between poverty and poor achievement. (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Allington, 2006; Hilferty et al., 2010; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). School districts across the nation have been confronted with the implications of the lack of preparedness that exists amongst children of poverty entering the school system since the conception of a formalized school setting (Jackson, 2014).

An additional easily identifiable theme in research is the benefit that exists as a result of students attending an FDK program. Reports have indicated an increase in achievement merely through the attendance of a full-day of schooling in the kindergarten year versus a half day alone. (Cannon, Jackowitz, & Painter, 2006; Cooper et al., 2010). When students attend a FDK, it is not merely an opportunity for a longer day, rather, it is an chance to close the opportunity gap (Cooper et al., 2010).

Teacher strategies, or teacher behaviors, that are implemented at a certain level of fidelity demonstrate an increase in achievement at various levels in the school setting (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Griffith et al., 2011; Jensen, 2008). This is important to note, as these strategies may begin to empower teachers and districts with a specific platform to effectively close the achievement gap.

When the research is synthesized, there is no argument that students of poverty enter school with an academic deficit to that of their affluent peers, FDK provides an optimal experience versus half-day kindergarten, and specific teacher strategies can yield higher results

in student gains (Cannon, Jackowitz, & Painter 2006; Cooper et al., 2010; Farr, 2010; Jensen, 2008; Nye et al., 2004; Pigford, 2001; Schroeder, 2007). However, the research is insufficient when it comes to defining the perceptions teachers have around the importance of the teacher–student relationship and its impact on students of poverty in an FDK setting. When these behaviors are clearly defined and paired with implications that exist for early learners, teacher preparation programs will be able to incorporate the findings within their methodology courses to better prepare teachers of young learners by providing an increased target toward closing the achievement gap (Farr, 2010; Jensen, 2008; Pigford, 2001).

Equally important, current teachers within an FDK setting will have access to this information and have within their grasp the ability to strengthen their own skill set through acquiring the skills necessary through personal professional reflection and growth or professional development. School districts will be equipped with the findings and contain augmented leverage to increase focused professional development opportunities in anticipation of more effectively closing the achievement gap in a timely manner (Brownell et al., 2015; Farr, 2010; Jensen, 2008; Pigford, 2001). The potential significance may be the necessary element to creating an equalizer to change the starting line for students of poverty when it comes to reading achievement.

Another key element that greatly influences achievement and confirms the necessity to dig deeper is that CCSSs are adopted in 43 states and maintain an elevated rigor over previous standards (CCSS, 2015). These standards were built upon the best standards in the United States, the expectations found in other high-performing countries, and an analysis of research. The standards have a common thread throughout, with a focus on two main elements—knowledge and application (Standards in Your State, n.d.). Within these two areas of focus, one can find

various levels of rigor and relevance. These are categorized by quadrants as classified by Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge guide (Standards in Your State, n.d.).

Figure 1

*Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge Source*



Figure 1: Adapted from Tracy Watanabe's blog entitled [wwwatanabe](http://wwwatanabe.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_1.html) located at [http://wwwatanabe.blogspot.com/p/blog-page\\_1.html](http://wwwatanabe.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_1.html)

These models are linked to both English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics. English Language Arts are infused with technology standards, as well as vast amounts of nonfiction to encompass social studies, history, and writing (Standards in Your State, n.d.). Recognizing the high level of rigor infused, it is imperative to increase the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student. If students do not have a positive relationship with their teacher, it is common for students to become disinterested and disengaged from their schoolwork (Silva et al., 2011).

The concept of yielding a positive relationship between the teacher and the student seems to be relatively simple, and yet, research has supported the notion that forging these relationships may be challenging or difficult (Birch & Ladd, 1997). However, while weighing the pros and cons of teacher–student relationships, it is easy to see there is evidence of decreased behavior issues and overall classroom conflict, while at the same time motivation toward academic performance and social skills. As described by Birch and Ladd (1997), student response indicated students liked school more and experienced decreased loneliness if they had healthy teacher–student relationships. Many factors affect a students’ performance both academically and socially, and how they feel individually. Birch and Ladd (1997) contended that students who have close relationships with their teachers appear more engaged, motivated, more likely to attend and are generally more cooperative. Teachers who focus on a positive classroom environment and cultivate a positive relationship are able to help students transition more successfully into the school experience, as well as augment social, emotional, and academic achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Perry & Weinstein, 1998).

Birch and Ladd (1997) confirm the relationship between the teacher and the student serves a very important role for helping incoming kindergarten students’ transition into the school setting. A sample of kindergarten students ( $n = 206$ , mean age = 5.58 years) and their teachers took part in a study intended for examining the role of three individual facets of the teacher–child relationship (closeness, dependency, and conflict). Reliance in the teacher–child relationship surfaced as a robust correlate of school adjustment challenges and a lesser amount of constructive engagement with the school atmosphere. Additionally, teacher identified conflict was connected with teachers' ratings of whether students liked school, presence of school aversion, and willing involvement in the classroom. Finally, teacher–child intimacy was



confidently linked with children's academic performance, the student's feelings about school, and student self-directedness (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

Understanding the clear need for a positive relationship between a student and the teacher and the rigorous academic demands, as evidenced through the CCSS, caused this researcher to ponder whether FDK teachers realize the powerful influence this has on student achievement. After all, it is this group of teachers who are the initial exposure to formal education for many students. The realization of this concept is of special interest to this researcher, who serves as an administrator in human resources in a large urban district.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

The goal of this study was to look deeply into the perceptions FDK teachers have regarding the importance of the teacher–student relationship. The goal was that by understanding the perceptions of the teachers, greater insight would be gained in how teachers perceive the role of the relationship between the teacher and the student and the impact on achievement. The high interest in these necessary components yielded the rationale for a strand of research that calls for the qualitative approach.

The methodology to provide an answer to the question selected was as follows:

1. Pilot interviews to assess viability
2. In-depth interviews with 9 FDK teachers
3. Audio recorded and transcribed
4. Coding to identify themes
5. Member checking

Individual teacher interviews with 9 participants representing varied levels of experience and gender, provided a significant contribution to the qualitative component through the deeper

identification of what teachers believe about the role of the relationship between the teacher and the student (Creswell, 2014). In this case, the greater insight under study was the perception FDK teachers maintain regarding the relationship between the teacher and student, specifically with students of poverty. Informed consent was an important portion of the study to ensure participants fully understood the purpose and understood the safe environment in which they could share open and transparent responses.

This provided an even greater opportunity to gain deep insight into true teacher perceptions and reinforced the premise of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory as the theoretical framework for this study. Bowlby (1988) shares that attachment behavior can be described as a behavior that results in a person attaining closeness to another individual who is perceived as more equipped to cope with the environment. Teacher-student relationships are one way in which students can develop necessary attachments with an authority figure from which they can model positive behaviors. Bowlby (1988) emphasizes that children need to have an attachment figure available and that the individual must be responsive. Bowlby (1982) posed that child development centered on the child's ability to form a secure relationship with their mother or immediate caregiver. This crucial bond is thought to provide the child with a secure base which fosters increased learning and growth (Bowlby, 1982). Children who do not form a secure attachment may experience adverse developmental delays and difficulty forming positive, meaningful relationships.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Poverty is a plague that imposes itself onto the lands of America and other nations around the world. Significant amounts of research about the impact of poverty on student achievement and success have been conducted revealing findings that are alarming (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). This literature review provided a greater understanding of the role of early intervention in a full-day Kindergarten (FDK) classroom, as well as teacher strategies that are deemed as effective practices. It examined the following five areas: (a) the growth mindset, (b) effective instructional strategies, (c) the impact of FDK, (d) formative assessment in the classroom, and finally, (e) the relationship between the teacher and the student.

Implementing effective teacher practices requires knowledge of what those practices are and understanding them deeply for the highest level of implementation (Jensen, 2008; Nye et al., 2004). A large portion of the literature review in this chapter focused on individual teacher strategies, or concepts, that could be utilized to positively influence achievement in an FDK classroom. These strategies and concepts were studied in isolation as individual, stand-alone concepts. Examining the practices individually ultimately provided the platform of which this study's research question rests.

#### **The Impact of Poverty on Student Learning and School Readiness**

Research pointedly indicates that child poverty is a common factor in many communities within the United States (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Jackson (2014) describes students of poverty as

disadvantaged and cited examples of this phenomenon dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, specifically sharing that *Sesame Street* was established to provide a preschool offering to families of poverty through free public television (Jackson, 2014). The premise was that if parents could not get their children to a preschool or afford a preschool, the preschool would come to them via free public television. This is noteworthy to portray that this is not a new concern. Rather, it is longitudinal, generational, and spans over decades. Jackson (2014) went on to report about the sense of urgency by stating,

In the 1960s, the United States began to recognize poverty and urban disinvestment and tackled these crises under the banner of the War on Poverty. Many experts—specifically child psychologists, educators, and preschool policy planners in the U.S. government—sought to intervene in the lives of “disadvantaged children” and compensate this population (p. 191).

A synthesis of the National Center for Educational Statics (IES, 2014) indicated that in the United States, roughly 21% of children were living in poverty in 2012. This range extended from 11% in North Dakota to 32% in Mississippi (NCES, 2014). This confirms that poverty is an issue that each state faces and must prepare to address within the school setting. Figure 2 displays the child poverty data for children under 18.

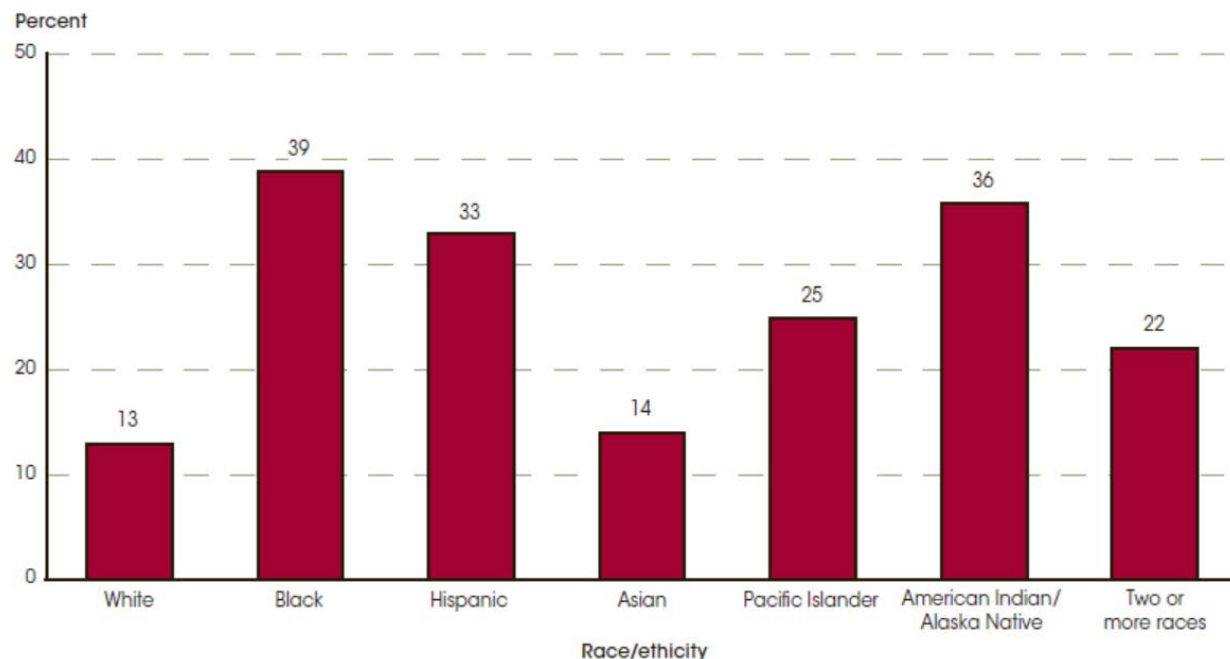
Figure 2

*Children of Poverty Under Age 18*

*Note.* The measure of child poverty includes families in which all children are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. Adapted from “The Condition of Education: Children Living in Poverty,” graph illustration by the Institute of Education Services, 2014.

Understanding the implication of poverty within the school system drives the importance of the awareness of the ethnical composition of students of poverty. Figure 3 illustrates the breakdown of child poverty levels by ethnicity.

Figure 3

*Children Under 18 Living in Poverty (by Ethnicity)*

*Note.* This graph display of children of poverty includes families in which all children are connected to the households by adoption, birth, or marriage. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Adapted from “The Condition of Education: Children Living in Poverty,” graph illustration by the Institute of Education Services, 2014.

Many research studies support the notion that poverty has an adverse effect on student achievement that can be debilitating for students for a lifetime (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Crosnoe and Cooper (2010) explored the influence of economic disparities on family structure and relationships using the family socialization model. This model poses that families who experience economic hardship also experience other problems such as depression, anxiety, and disorganization. Family dynamics can influence a child’s ability to be academically successful and can be disruptive to learning opportunities. Crosnoe and Cooper (2010) proposed that by modifying income disparities and incorporating school involvement into the dynamic of the

family, outcomes can be altered and behaviors changed into those that promote academic achievement.

According to The National Educational Goals Panel (1997), school readiness is shaped by three components: the child, the school, and the family and community. Readiness not only refers to academic readiness but also physical, cognitive, and emotional readiness that influences learning experiences. The National Educational Goals Panel (1997) renders that there are five measurements to assess a child's level of school readiness: (a) motor development and physical health, (b) the development of social-emotional skills, (c) the incoming student's ATL, (d) language development, (e) as well as intellect and basic knowledge. Schools readiness, which refers to the school's ability to teach students, is critical for a child's success in school (Emig, 2000).

Although most children enter kindergarten at or around the age of five, their preparedness for formal education may vary (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Children's knowledge can differ for many reasons, including age, environment, activity level, socioeconomic status, and parental participation. It is important that educators are able to clearly define what school readiness means not only for the child, but also for the schools themselves. Ackerman and Barnett (2005) note that one way in which school readiness can be measured is through assessments. Assessments can provide vital information as to whether or not a child has the skills necessary to learn. School readiness may also be determined through teacher perception of readiness. Skilled teachers can identify traits, such as the ability to effectively communicate and demonstrate emotional coping skills, as characteristics that are necessary for school readiness and success (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). Schools also must demonstrate readiness in assessing and developing support for meeting students' learning needs. "Ready Schools" play a crucial part in

meeting the diverse needs of students by participating in continued professional growth, adopting new approaches to teaching, and promoting parental involvement (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005).

Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, and Nelson (2010) found that children of poverty can experience a delay in readiness for kindergarten in comparison to their advantaged peers. It is hoped that preschool programs created by legislation, such as the Head Start program, can assist teachers and students in narrowing the achievement gap for children of poverty and prepare them for entering formal school in kindergarten (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Grisham-Brown, Hallam, & Brookshire, 2006). Welsh et al. (2010) explored the effects of early learning interventions for children of poverty by observing participants of the Head Start program throughout their entrance into kindergarten. Measurements of cognitive growth were tested at the beginning, middle, and end of the kindergarten school year, and it was discovered that the school readiness gap narrowed (Welsh et al., 2010). Preschool is a critical point in child development because it can provide children with the ability to self-regulate and develop executive function skills, thus allowing children to learn in an effective manner. Welsh et al. (2010) proposed that possessing these adaptive characteristics can prepare children for school readiness and give them the ability to develop numerical and literacy comprehension and achievement.

The U.S. Department of Education studied students in grades 3–5 in 71 high-poverty schools in 2001 and discovered that these students of poverty consistently scored lower on academic achievement tests than that of their affluent peers (USDOE, 2001). This disparity was clearly evidenced in the findings among the multiple locations and reinforces the impetus for educators to understand the implications for the school system.



According to Cooper et al. (2010), kindergarten was originally created to serve as a transition from family life to school life by providing children a safe environment in which they could socialize with other children. However, over time, the number of single and working parents rose, as well as increased academic expectations, which led to the implementation of structured, academic-focused FDK (Cooper et al., 2010). Some of the positive attributes that have been identified as resulting from FDK include increased academic achievement and preparation which leads to higher retention rates (Cooper et al., 2010). Literature also indicates that there are several nonacademic advantages that can be gained from FDK, such as a positive self-image and tenacity that is encouraged by increased opportunities to socialize with peers (Cooper et al., 2010). Cooper et al. (2010) found that children enrolled in FDK programs achieved higher test scores than those in half-day kindergarten.

### **Teacher Impact—The Growth Mindset**

Dweck (2006) shared the value and importance of self-view and the ability to influence personal growth and cultivate individual success. Dweck (2006) also shared how the business world, parents, community, and schools have the ability to influence self-view through a mindset. Dweck (2006) described a fixed mindset as containing a lack of flexibility and a growth mindset as controlling personal learning and decision making. The individual with a growth mindset believes that hard work and perseverance help with individual growth and development (Dweck, 2006).

Teachers can influence the mindset by praising effort and helping students understand that failure is acceptable. This is when students are more prepared to learn and grow. Rather than praise the grade, it is recommended to praise the hard work that went into making the grade happen (Dweck, 2006; Gunderson et al., 2013; Jensen, 2008).

Students of poverty who enter the school system are typically academically behind and have a more challenging time developing and attaining the necessary literacy skills (Ramey & Ramey, 2004). This leads to future reading difficulties and low-academic performance (Griffith et al., 2011). Due to this disadvantage at the students' entry point, it becomes necessary for their achievement to be accelerated. Griffith et al. (2011) shared that one way to accelerate this learning is to utilize a professional development model based on ERF findings from action research. In response, the professional development model entitled optimal learning sector could be implemented, consisting of the following: appropriate environment, research-based curriculum, and instruction informed by professional development (Griffith et al., 2011). The environment has an exponential focus on the role of the teacher as expanding resilience, perseverance, and the safety net provided for students to take risks and enjoy the freedom to make mistakes (Griffith et al., 2011; Jensen, 2008).

Li-Grining et al. (2010) reviewed the findings of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Cohort) using individual growth modeling. The researchers were looking for a correlation between early ATL and academic achievement in elementary school. ATL refers to a child's persistence, regulation of emotions, diligence, flexibility, and organization (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Developmental theorists believe that children who have a cumulative advantage during the early learning phases continue to accrue advantages as their education continues (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Children with early ATL have the ability to self-regulate and persevere, thereby allowing them to focus and cooperate during learning (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Understanding the positive correlation between early ATL and academic achievement can help educators to develop preventative measures to ensure that all students are given equal opportunity to succeed (Li-Grining et al., 2010).

Abelev (2009) notes that children who are born into poverty start their lives at a disadvantage. This is due in large part to exposure to factors such as negative parenting, community components that involve crime and drug use, as well as the likelihood to attend high-poverty schools with low-performing peers. It is suggested there are certain social–psychological characteristics that may yield a change in upward movement for children of poverty as well as environmental factors (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005).

Abelev (2009) facilitated in-depth, life-history interviews with 48 successful adults who were once considered “at-risk” children to identify common characteristics that aided these disadvantaged children to become resilient youth and successful adults. A common theme among these 48 successful adults was the importance of a person’s view of the world in shaping his or her world. The consensus from these interviews is that the aforementioned protective factors influence positive outcomes for disadvantaged children of poverty, and teachers play a critical role in this development (Abelev, 2009).

Children’s resiliency, or ability to adapt to changing environments, can greatly influence their self-perception, as well as their ability to cope and problem solve (Pawlina & Stanford, 2011). Pawlina and Stanford (2011) suggested that developing a “growth mindset” within teaching practices will allow teachers to give students a sense of agency in their ability to create and learn knowledge. The theory of a growth mindset is based on the idea that intellect is not fixed but has the ability to acclimate to change and experiences. According to Pawlina and Stanford (2011), “by developing a growth mindset, people realize that through effort they can grow, learn, and effectively respond to their world” (p. 31). Resiliency plays a crucial role in helping children cope with challenges and can provide them the courage to continue problem solving (Li-Grining et al., 2010; Pawlina & Stanford, 2011). Instilling confidence is one method

used to promote resiliency. Children respond positively to references to past accomplishments, and teachers can use these experiences to encourage children to meet challenges head on.

Practice also plays a role in mastering skills. While children will not always initially succeed, it is important for them to develop the ability to accept their mistakes and use them as an opportunity to learn and grow (Pawlina & Stanford, 2011).

The way in which a child sees intelligence as either fixed or changeable can shape the way in which a child is motivated to learn (Dweck, 2006). The belief that intelligence is fixed and unchangeable can interfere with a child's ability to learn, develop positive behaviors, and meet new challenges. Gunderson et al. (2013) explored the influence of parental acclaim on how children perceive their learning abilities as fixed or malleable. Results indicated that children who were given a proportionate amount of praise from their parents from the ages of 14–38 months demonstrated an increased likeliness to view intelligence as malleable. Children who received regular praise from a young age were more likely to demonstrate resiliency and promising problem-solving abilities up to 5 years later. It is from this early framework that children develop their motivation to learn and try new approaches to learnings (ATL's) (Gunderson et al., 2013).

Research indicates individuals view intelligence as either fixed or malleable (Dweck, 2006; Gunderson et al., 2013). A fixed mindset indicates the individual believes that intelligence is fixed or predetermined. However, individuals who view themselves through a growth mindset believe they have the capability to shape or change their cognitive growth (Dweck, 2006; Gutshall, 2013). Gutshall (2013) discussed how students who believe in a growth mindset have an increased likeliness to engage actively in the learning process through techniques involving problem-solving skills. A growth mindset can provide students with motivation to further their

skills. In this study, two groups of teachers were observed to assess the quality of support offered to students based on two beliefs centered on a type of mindset. The first group of teachers were told that intelligence was unchangeable or fixed. The second group of teachers were instructed that intelligence could be malleable or shaped. Gutshall (2013) found that teachers who viewed intelligence as malleable were more likely to provide increased support towards achieving goals.

According to Flett and Hewitt (2014), perfectionism in children and adolescents can produce increased levels of anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and suicidal thoughts. The prevalence of perfectionism within Western society has created a need for schools to formulate early intervention strategies in an effort to prevent and reduce levels of perfectionism among students. Flett and Hewitt (2014) state schools can incorporate themes or frameworks within the school setting that encourage children to resist the need to achieve perfection and encourage students to view themselves within the growth mind perspective. Growth mind perspective encourages children to see their ability to learn as changeable rather than fixed. Along with reducing perfectionism among students, school interventions should also encourage students to develop increased levels of resiliency with the ability to problem solve (Flett & Hewitt, 2014).

### **Positive Impact of Instructional Strategies**

Lacour and Tissington (2011) shared implications for children of poverty where (a) family income is at a level of poverty (negative), (b) the influence a mother's education level has on student achievement (positive), and (c) the influence of a classroom teacher (high). Allington (2006) states that classroom strategies upheld by the teacher produce high results for closing the achievement gap (specific ones yield an even greater outcome). Understanding the critical nature of this variable makes it imperative that a teacher utilizes strategies that are deemed effective

(Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Griffith et al., 2011; Jensen, 2008). This setting is ideally the first experience a student has in school. Table 1 illustrates strategies deemed effective to enrich brain development (Jensen, 2008).

Table 1

*Effective Teacher Strategies*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
Provide differentiated instruction.	Uniqueness is the rule, not the exception. Purposeful switches change the sifting, process, and output of the brain.
Frequently utilize error correction.	The brain will think the wrong answer is right if not corrected, and it takes longer to unlearn an error.
Segment instruction.	Brains have input limitations. Cognitive and emotional overload occurs when there is a high volume of input.
Provide a consistently enriching environment.	Physical, academic, and social environments have the capacity to change the brain.
Monitor for frequent adjustment.	Brains are highly adaptive and respond to change within structures and systems.
Provide emotional supervision and management.	Emotional status can influence memory, attention, learning, behavior, and meaning.
Manage the positives, and decrease the profound negatives.	Big positives and frequent small course corrections are good for the brain.
Nurture and guide meaning in an intentional and proactive manner.	The more important a concept is, the more time a teacher should spend on it.
Manage and influence perception more significantly than reality.	Experience is based on perception rather than reality. Changing perception allows one to change experience.
Manage students' memories due to the malleable nature of them.	There are multiple ways the brain learns and stores information. Engaging multiple learning and memory systems is crucial.

Use creative repetition.	Brains need reinforcement.
Teach students how to guesstimate and prediction daily.	Prediction is the strongest survival skill, yet teachers do not regularly teach it.
Ask for student input; then incorporate it.	Formative assessments are used to make decisions.
Provide Social Structures	Making strong, pro-social contact should be a priority in the classroom setting.

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*Note.* Adapted from E. Jensen, 2008, *Brain-Based Learning: The New Paradigm of Teaching*, pp. 245–246.

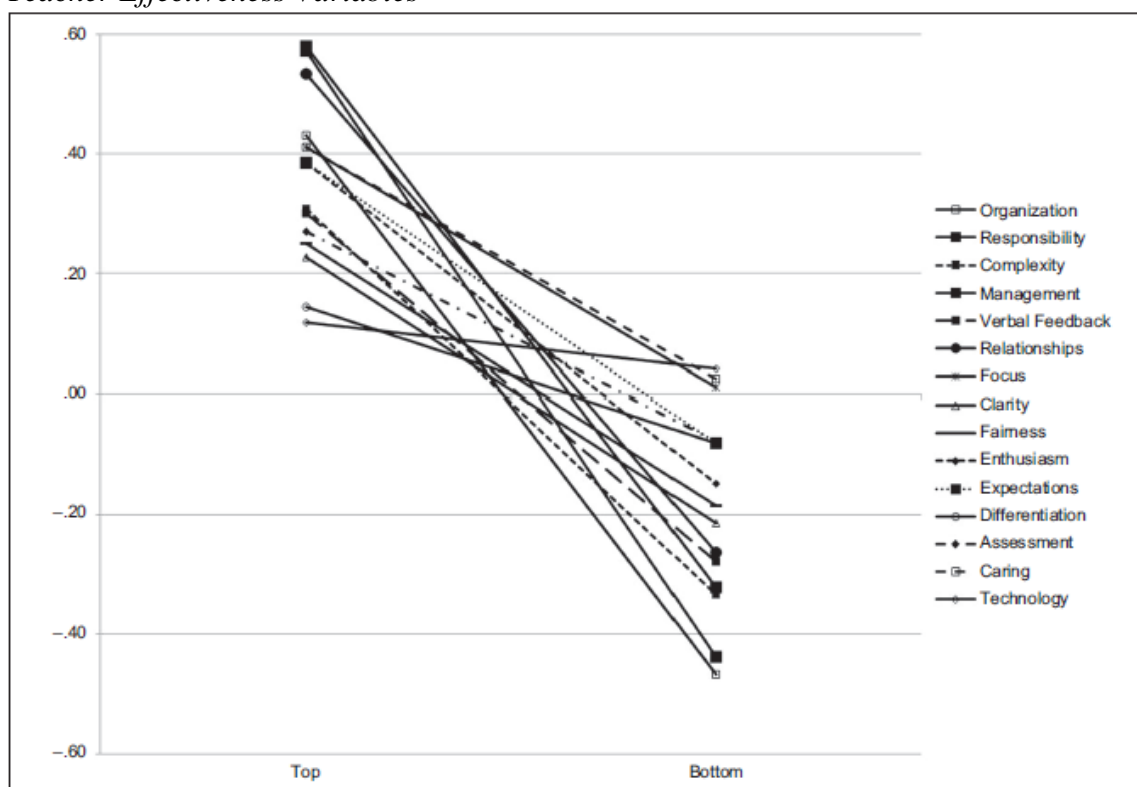
Stronge et al. (2011) studied test scores in math and reading to determine if classroom methodologies of effective versus less effective teachers positively or negatively impacted student achievement. An outline of the study is shared in the following:

- Phase 1 of the study consisted of 307 fifth-grade teachers who were assessed using hierarchical linear modeling to assess student gains and the correlation to student growth. The highest and lowest quartile teachers were identified.
- Phase 2 of the study consisted of 17 highest quartile and 15 lowest quartile teachers. This included inquiry of their classroom management and instructional strategies.
- Findings from classroom observations discovered from phase 2 were paralleled to the student gains (or losses) in phase 1 to identify the impact of certain teacher behaviors on student data over the course of one year.
- The upper quartile teachers demonstrated greater frequency of the use of effective strategies. However, the strongest correlation was discovered through the use of effective classroom management and personal qualities that included a component dedicated to better relationships with students (Stronge et al., 2011).

When seeking understanding about variables that positively impact achievement in the classroom that are within the teacher's locus of control, it is essential to understand what those variables are. In a cross-case analysis, Stronge et al. (2011) highlighted the teacher strategies that are deemed more effective according to the research findings. Figure 4 presents a visual of the various strategies and the correlation to achievement. The higher the quartile score, the more effective the strategy. Again, the strongest correlation was discovered through the use of effective classroom management and personal qualities that included a component dedicated to better relationships with students (Stronge et al., 2011). This is clearly depicted in the figure.

Figure 4

*Teacher Effectiveness Variables*



*Note.* This visual depicts the level of effectiveness of bottom quartile and top quartile teachers. Adapted from “What Makes Good Teachers Good? A Cross-Case Analysis of the Connection Between Teacher Effectiveness and Student Achievement,” by J. Stronge, T. Ward, and L. Grant, 2011, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 62(4), p. 349.



Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) reported that a 4-year trial in which students and teachers were assigned randomly to classes to approximate teacher effects on student achievement revealed noteworthy information. Teacher properties were appraised within the same school and between teacher variance modules of accomplishment status and mounting achievement gains to determine which teacher strategies were most notable for helping students achieve. A large gain was noted by teachers utilizing specific strategies. The gains of second- and third-grade students were substantial, especially with low-income students (Nye et al., 2004).

### **FDK—Does It Make a Difference?**

Data from standardized expressive vocabulary tests have been used to determine how the level of the parent's education influenced vocabulary development (Becker, 2011). Becker's (2011) study of vocabulary revealed that students whose parents had a higher level of education entered with a higher level of vocabulary (Becker, 2011). Students were placed into an early learning setting, and vocabulary measurement continued throughout the study. Vocabulary development was also measured through home visits and recorded video interactions between a mother and child. The study revealed that students with educated parents developed vocabulary more quickly than that of their peers with less educated parents (Becker, 2011). It was determined that the gap was not able to be closed with students who had a lesser vocabulary (less educated parents), yet the gap did not widen; rather, it remained the same with the intervention of preschool (Becker, 2011). This research revealed that there is no progression that allows children of low-socioeconomic status to catch-up (Abbate-Vaughn, Paugh, & Douglass, 2011; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Gassman-Pines & Yoshikawa, 2006). However, low-socioeconomic status children who do *not* attend preschool fall even further behind. The case for FDK is cultivated.

Campbell and Ramey (1994) performed an analysis of a follow-up study of 88 African American students of poverty and their families. The initial study examined four areas of purposeful intervention: no intervention (control group), preschool through age 3, preschool only to age 5, and school age only. Four different groups ( $n = 88$ ) were admitted into the study between the years of 1972 and 1977, using a specific set of consistent and specific criterion (Campbell & Ramey, 1994). The Weschsler Intelligence Scale for Children (revised) was used to determine the cognitive level of the participants when they reached age 12 (Campbell & Ramey, 1994). The findings of Campbell and Ramey (1994) suggest that the most effective intervention was preschool, as the students maintained favorable academic status through the age of 12 when they were tested. Campbell and Ramey (1994) reported that this study provides important policy implications for the support of early intervention and that of FDK.

Fielding et al. (2007) walked the reader through their experience of working with a school of high poverty, high diversity, and low-achievement scores. Details were shared about Kennewick's model that yielded high levels of student growth and achievement. It accounted for things that did work and did not work, while navigating toward the common goal of 90% of students meeting the benchmark in reading. A common finding for what worked was kindergarten expansion (Fielding et al., 2007).

Fielding et al. (2007) asserted that the sense of urgency around children of poverty is not going away. They referred to many important matters such as poverty, social disadvantages, and other issues that impact the public school system. Legislative actions and requirements, as well as educational initiatives, are touted as the major rationale for schools to develop reform efforts. A significant focus of Fielding et al. (2007) was the emphasis of attending kindergarten,

establishing kindergarten readiness, and building partnerships with parents as a means to close the achievement gap.

Litty and Hatch (2006) discussed the consequences of delayed identification of children with disabilities in kindergarten and made a case for a full-day experience. In many schools across the nation, recognizing a child as having special needs is often deferred until children are age seven or above. This is due in part to the lack of time during a half-day experience. Litty and Hatch (2006) suggested that the objectives of kindergarten have changed over time and that the increase in curriculum standards have augmented the need to identify children who require learning support. Kindergarten was once thought of as a transitional period from home to school life (Fielding et al., 2007) but now consists of greater demands. There is a need for this experience to be all day versus a portion of the day (Cannon, Jackowitz, & Painter, 2006; Tomlinson, 2015). Children entering kindergarten classes today are expected to have a specific set of knowledge and skills prior to entrance that were once expectations of children entering first and second grades (Litty & Hatch, 2006). The rigor and analytical thinking required within CCSS provide evidence of the elevated expectations (Standards in Your State, n.d.).

### **Formative Assessment in K-12 Education**

When new teachers enter the field of education, their focus is typically on the managerial components of teaching, such as classroom management and the technical components of teaching. The mentoring design that comes alongside from many districts typically maintains support in those same areas (Athanasas & Achinstein, 2003). It is only after the beginning years of teaching that the focus begins to change to that of the student as an individual. Athanasas and Achinstein (2003) shared the framework for why it is difficult for new teachers to focus on students with such challenging needs, such as varied academic needs (special education), English

language learners, students of poverty, diverse learners, and complex learning standards.

Athanases and Achinstein (2003) proposed that teachers are aware of these complexities, which should be addressed with new teacher mentoring. If understanding that formative assessment helps teachers differentiate instruction, then the argument is that it should be a part of a teacher's repertoire from the very beginning (Bakula, 2010).

Athanases and Achinstein (2003) examined case studies focused on mentor teacher–new teacher relationships and practices. Their study considered the knowledge of 37 teacher induction leaders and discovered that mentors who worked with new teachers to focus them on the learning of individual students promoted gains in achievement. The greatest growth results were demonstrated among underachieving students and correlated to formative assessment (Athanases & Achinstein, 2003).

Heugh, Bax, and Branford-White (2014) observed a cohort at the University of Science Extended Degree course to understand if there existed a correlation between formative assessments and higher grades. Part of the formative assessment process required ongoing student and teacher participation. Students and faculty in the cohort utilized technology to create a virtual learning environment in which students were able to access various tools for learning, such as documents, videos, and other forms of media. It was through these web courses that students could participate in self-paced, module-based learning via the Internet. Formative assessments were integrated within the modules and provided testing in which students had to obtain a minimum score before moving to the next module. Researchers found that formative assessment encouraged and motivated students to expand their learning and identify learning gaps. A correlation was identified between student involvement with learning materials and higher grades among these university students (Heugh, Bax, & Branford-White, 2014).

Grisham-Brown et al. (2006) emphasized the importance of early intervention and accountability in academic achievement. The work of Grisham-Brown et al. (2006) work provided Head Start teachers an assessment process by which teachers can monitor student development within the Head Start Outcomes Framework. This program is referred to as Project Link, which is a program that promotes “LINKages among assessment, Curriculum, and Outcomes in order to Enhance School Success for Children in Head Start Programs” (Grisham-Brown et al., 2006, p. 46). Using a test entitled the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming a System (AEPS), Project Link was able to track and assess the progress of early learners and develop appropriate curriculum for their needs (Grisham-Brown et al., 2006). The individual case study of one Head Start teacher revealed that implementing formative assessments had a positive impact on student achievement (Grisham-Brown et al., 2006).

Educational practices have relied increasingly on formal assessments to measure the effectiveness of learning strategies and to assign accountability for measuring student progress (Snyder, Wixson, Talapatra, & Roach, 2008). Formal assessment is an imperative tool that is used in identifying and providing children at risk with the resources to academically achieve (Snyder et al., 2008). While standardized assessments can provide educators the ability to identify and classify needs, they provide limited information regarding the actions that must be taken to move towards academic progress. Assessments that are malleable in delivery can help educators to interpret results and achieve positive learning outcomes. Snyder et al. (2008) found that assessments should not only provide accurate information regarding the progress of students but also validate the effectiveness of intervention procedures.

McConnell (2000) shared that a formal assessment plays a critical role in identifying cognitive and behavioral delays. Information gathered from assessments shapes the growth of

early learning interventions for children at risk for delay. Continual assessment of learning also provides educators the ability to receive feedback to examine the effectiveness of implemented early learning intervention strategies. McConnell (2000) emphasized the importance for educators to embrace the assessment process as an opportunity to collect valid data that can be used to create informed choices when establishing interventions. Assessments should contain purpose and serve to increase teacher and student engagement in academic processes. McConnell (2000) predicted that as formal assessment evolves, so will attention to detail, context, and integrated learning strategies. It is hoped that continued progress in assessment procedures will provide at-risk children with the resources they need to succeed academically (McConnell, 2000).

There is often confusion concerning the differences between summative and formative assessment. Variations in understanding these types of assessments can make it difficult for educators to define and comprehend assessment procedures (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007). One example of confusion surrounding assessment is the variation of testing that exists across schools and school districts. The inability to develop accurate measurement of progress hinders educators from using assessments to problem solve and develop learning strategies for students. Formative assessments are often misconstrued as a method that relies heavily on student testing to comprehend student learning capabilities (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007). However, formative assessment occurs by observing how information is presented to students before and after learning to determine teaching effectiveness. Summative assessment, on the other hand, collects data from students after testing in an attempt to predict future academic success of students and schools. Formative assessment provides teachers the opportunity to modify teaching methods to

encourage future academic success. Feedback also plays a role in effectively shaping the learning experience to attain set goals (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007).

Assessments that are formative in nature are typically informal and can range from oral response opportunities in class all the way to performance activities, tests, or quizzes (Bakula, 2010; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). Stiggins and DuFour (2009) shared that schools and teachers should utilize formative assessments to provide clarity around whether or not students are learning what they are supposed to be learning, improve the instructional service delivery model of classroom teachers, and allow for re-teaching concepts to support struggling learners. Successful results through an examination of an action research project involving formative assessment were shared along with details of how it improved teaching and learning in one school district (Stiggins & DuFour, 2009).

### **Teacher–Student Relationships**

O'Connor and McCartney (2007) studied the connections between the quality of teacher–child relationships from preschool through third grade and students' accomplishment data using third-grade achievement data and a detailed gathering of anecdotal data about teacher behaviors. The notion was that higher quality teachers would yield higher results. O'Connor and McCartney (2007) shared that the contextual systems model is the way in which various systems are interconnected and work to make up the whole part of the system. Consequently, the effects of an influence in one system may be prejudiced by influence in another system. Four of the systems, in order of proximity to the child, are (1) the individual child, (2) family, (3) classroom, and (4) culture. The classroom teacher is an integral component to the contextual systems model and fulfilling this cyclical model (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

Numerous obstacles, such as varying student needs and capabilities, emphasis on high-stakes testing, and standards-based curriculum, can create difficulties for both students and teachers. Duchaine et al. (2011) sought to understand the role of providing teachers and students with immediate and relative positive feedback in an effort to increase student participation and engagement and produce teacher effectiveness. Participation in the academic setting is critical for academic success, and positive feedback can provide teachers the opportunity to avoid responding incorrectly and reinforcing negative behaviors (Duchaine et al., 2011). One form of positive feedback to students referred to was behavior-specific praise statements (BSPS). This is a teaching strategy teachers can use in their classrooms to give students positive feedback in the form of praise for desired behaviors. Duchaine et al. (2011) shared how BSPS involves the teacher identifying and expressing approval for desired behaviors. Positive feedback should be immediate, continual, and relevant. Findings indicated that the use of BSPS increases positive behaviors and increases engagement among students. Along with the use of BSPS to encourage student engagement, it was suggested that teachers also receive feedback on their effectiveness to deliver BSPS to students. This can be done through professional observation and mentoring that encourages teachers to be effective through self-reflection (Duchaine et al., 2011).

Silva et al. (2011) confirmed that children of poverty can face difficulty adjusting to formal learning environments. Educators need to possess the ability to identify disadvantages associated with poverty in an effort to provide students with equal learning opportunities. It is also important to establish that students who learn effectively must be engaged in the learning material. According to Silva et al. (2011), children of poverty are more likely to be disengaged within the classroom in comparison to their advantaged peers. Disengagement in school can be used to predict poor future student academic outcomes. Silva et al. (2011) examined the



influence of both emotional school engagement, which denotes a student's capacity to form connections and relationships within their schools, and student's effortful control, or attitudes about school, on the student's ability to academically achieve. Developing early positive attitudes surrounding school along with the development of teacher–student relationships can influence a child's academic success. Effortful control utilized by students can encourage students to positively engage with learning and others (Silva et al., 2011).

Lee (2012) shares that students across the world have steadily been experiencing disengagement from their schools. Research has shown that students often feel a lowered sense of belongingness that can result in decreased academic participation. Students who are not involved in their educational experience are at increased risk for displaying maladaptive behaviors, experiencing academic failure, and even choosing to drop out of school altogether. Lee (2012) found that students who had positive teacher–student relationships were more likely to put forth more effort demonstrating stamina and resiliency within the learning environment. Schools that encourage teacher–student relationships and exert academic pressure to excel can encourage students to invest more effort to obtain academic achievement. Research has found that engagement with teachers can help students develop a sense of pride and motivation to succeed in their academic endeavors (Lee, 2012).

Data from a longitudinal study were collected in three phases from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Care and Education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), consisting of over 1,000 children from birth through sixth grade to determine how the relationship between a teacher and a student impacts the child intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Findings revealed the following:

- Achievement increased when the quality of the teacher–student relationship was better.
- A positive teacher–student relationship was able to minimize the negative impact of a poor relationship between mother and child.
- The greater or more positive the teacher’s behavioral characteristics were toward the student, the higher yield on growth.

Early experiences play a crucial role in childhood development (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005). It is from these experiences that children learn how to succeed within their environment. Bagdi and Vacca (2005) emphasized the importance of three key factors in developing academic success, which included promotion, prevention, and intervention. Research has shown that when children’s emotional and physical needs are met, they are more adept to meet learning standards (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Guo & Harris, 2000). Integrated curriculum that addresses the needs of a child as a whole is a critical component to academic performance. Implementing a program that includes the three key factors can provide students and their family’s emotional stability, thereby improving outcomes for young children in academic settings (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005).

With an increase in maladaptive and violent behaviors among students within the school setting, Pigford (2001) sought to understand the influence of implementing appropriate classroom management strategies. Pigford (2001) also explored the importance of developing positive teacher–student relationships that encourage academic success. Teachers should incorporate student–relationship development into the curriculum to promote a positive and successful learning environment (Pigford, 2001; Spilt et al., 2012). Development of strategies to strengthen teacher–student trust can provide teachers the tools to form crucial connections to students. Pigford (2001) noted that teacher strategies to develop relationships could include

providing positive feedback, reducing negative comments, and showing invested interest in the lives of students. Teachers can also make connections with students by cultivating mutual interests such as sports or other activities.

According to Spilt et al. (2012), positive teacher–student relationships are thought to increase student academic achievement by encouraging children to engage in their education. Research has consequently demonstrated that negative relationships are a greater predictor of maladaptive behaviors, which can lead to delayed academic development and the inability to academically succeed (Spilt et al., 2012). The hope is that positive teacher–student relationships combat these risk factors to support academic achievement. Teacher–student relationships offer students the ability to increase student belongingness and provide motivation and goal setting, which increase student academic ability. Spilt et al. (2012) found a relationship between increased conflict and delayed academic growth. Boys, children of African American descent, and children of poverty were found to have an increased risk for continued conflict, leading to a decrease in academic achievement. Researchers have found as children grow older, warmth in teacher–student relationships decreased (Spilt et al., 2012). This reduction in warmth may be attributed to less emphasis on meeting children’s socio-emotional needs and a continued increase in academic expectations. The study implicates that warm teacher–student relationships can provide children support, security, and confidence that encourages academic achievement (Spilt et al., 2012).

Wu et al. (2010) utilized self-reports from teachers and students to examine the influence of teacher–student relationships on academic success. Research shows that teacher–student relationships consisting of heightened levels of agency and decreased instances of conflict produce signs of academic achievement upon formal assessment. Affirmative teacher–student

relationships can encourage a sense of inclusion, engagement, and an increase in desired behaviors in students (Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). Wu et al. (2010) measured teacher–student relationship quality (TSRQ) from a large, diverse sample of teachers and students using self-report techniques. From this sample, four clusters were revealed: congruent positive (high agency, decreased conflict), congruent negative (low agency, increased conflict), incongruent child negative (positive to average TSRQ, decrease in warmth), and incongruent child positive (poor peer–teacher reports of TSRQ, average reports from child). Results of the study indicated a strong influence between TSRQ and positive academic outcomes (Wu et al., 2010).

In the 1992 study entitled *Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children Birth to Adulthood*, Werner and Smith (1992) stated, “A caring relationship with a caring adult enables at-risk youth to make life-altering changes” (p. 34). It is essential to give a certain amount of freedom to students in developing this relationship (Fisher, Fraser, & Kent, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). It is the poignant emphasis of the role of the relationship in cultivating success that bridges us to the theoretical framework from which this study is built.

### **Theoretical Framework: Bowlby’s Attachment Theory**

British child psychologist, John Bowlby professed that attachment is a deep connectedness between human beings (Bowlby, 1988). This theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship developed between a mother and child and emphasizes the profound implication for developing other future relationships (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby (1982) suggested that attachment evolved as an aid to survival, and as a result, attachment is universal and occurs within all cultures.

Bowlby (1982) posed that child development centered on the child’s ability to form a secure relationship with their mother or immediate caregiver. This crucial bond is thought to

provide the child with a secure base which fosters increased learning and growth (Bowlby, 1982). Children who do not form a secure attachment may experience adverse developmental delays and difficulty forming positive, meaningful relationships.

According to Bowlby (1982), children base their idea of self and behavior on early childhood relationships, such as that of a mother and child. In mother-child attachment children model their mother's behavior. It is through the understanding of their relationship with their mother that children interpret the people and environment around them. Children who form a secure attachment are more likely to experience confidence in developing new relationships and new learning experiences. Children who form insecure attachments with their mother or primary caregiver can influence the child's ability to form meaningful, productive relationships with their teachers and peers. Those who do not form a secure base may also display signs of aggression and frustration (Bowlby, 1982).

When a child is unable to form a secure attachment from their primary caregiver, other institutions such as schools, may provide an alternative attachment figure that can provide the child a foundation for secure socio-emotional development. Bowlby (1988) shares that attachment behavior can be described as a behavior that results in a person with an authority figure from which they can model positive behaviors. Bowlby (1982) emphasizes that children need to have an attachment figure available and that the individual must be responsive. The result is a persistent feeling of security and this reinforces value and the need to continue the relationship. When children are unable to form this secure base at home, teachers can play a critical role in improving child outcomes.

Environment also plays a critical role in fostering student-teacher relationships and academic achievement. According to Bowlby (1988) the environment in which children interact

in can greatly influence child responsiveness. For example, interactions within the classroom demonstrate to the child how he or she will be treated and how others will respond to his or her actions. Teachers play a role in whether children will choose to respond positively or negatively.

Further research built on Bowlby's Attachment Theory from Buyse, Vaerschueren, and Doumen (2011), examines the role of the teacher-student relationships and indicates that teachers may play a critical role in buffering social and developmental delays associated with inadequate mother-child attachments. Buyse et al. (2011) suggest that teachers who demonstrate sensitivity to children lacking attachment can provide children emotional and social support needed to succeed. Lack of sensitivity can result in failure to form attachment bonds. Teachers that are committed to meeting student needs can provide children the ability to develop close relationships built on trust that foster increased communication. According to Curby, Brock, and Hamre (2013), children who form secure attachments are more likely to display social proficiency and increased testing scores.

Teachers who respond to students in an uncaring, insensitive manner may negatively or positively influence the direction of development a child may take. Curby et al. (2013) found that teachers who lacked sensitivity had difficulty forming student-teacher attachment relationships. As a result those children who did not develop critical student teacher relationships were at higher risk for social and academic difficulty.

Consistency within the classroom environment is another method that can be used to encourage positive student-teacher relationships. Children who experience inconsistencies within the classroom are often distracted and unable to work effectively. Teachers who provide consistent, quality interactions with students offer emotional stability and support. According to Curby et al. (2013) consistency can provide students the script by which they follow for other

social interactions. Children can learn to predict others emotional responses to their performed behaviors and anticipate consequences for undesirable actions. Consistency can help reduce negative behavior and result in increased positive actions.

In 2013, Curby et al. sought to understand the influence of student-teacher attachment formation on academic achievement. Utilizing data from 2,938 pre-kindergarten students and teachers, they found that students who experienced positive, consistent student-relationships and classroom environments displayed increased academic scores and emotional stability in comparison to less supportive classroom environments. When teacher behavior was predictable researchers found that students were able to focus academically and socially without distraction. Security provided by a consistent student-teacher relationship was found to be supportive of positive student outcomes. Consistency in teaching practices and strengthened social bonds provided children the confidence to try new tasks and increase social communication (Curby et al., 2013).

Attachment theory advanced from Bowlby's work to include two leading theorists. They continued the notion that when basic needs are met and linked with the bond of a mother and her child combined with the baby's ability to discover his or her surroundings (Bretherton, 1992), a significant bond is created. John Baldwin, a student in developmental psychology, was one of the inventors of this theory, and was converted to this platform of learning as a result of two children he observed in his professional setting as having disengaged bonds with their mother (Bretherton, 1992). Baldwin elected to examine the separation of mother and child and the influence of this separation on the child. Mary Ainsworth took his research to the next step in her dissertation, by introducing self-assessment scales into the attachment theory (Bretherton, 1992). Ainsworth combined Baldwin's research on the impact of separation from a mother on

the personality. Baldwin concluded that the infant must receive a caring, warm, and close relationship with the mother in order to be mentally healthy (Bretherton, 1992).

Ravitch and Riggan (2012) reported that a theoretical framework is initially based upon personal interest and takes on a new shape as literature is reviewed. Ultimately, a construct is created to maintain the key elements and focus of the study. These findings from Ravitch and Riggan (2012) consistently align with this researcher's development of the construct of this study. The theoretical framework is a configuration that seeks to support or substantiate a theory of a research investigation. It familiarizes and describes the theory that provides an explanation of why the research problem under examination exists. Furthermore, it determines the items of measure in the study, regulates what will be measured, seeks to identify the potential statistical relationships the researcher will look for, and importantly, guides the research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). The researcher began with a construct of seeking to understand classroom practices that greatly influence students of poverty in an FDK setting. While each factor studied has proven to be influential over augmenting student achievement, this researcher was halted at the impotence any one of these practices would have without the cultivation of a positive relationship between the teacher and the student. Operating under the belief that a relationship, or attachment, acts as a catalyst to all subsequent outcomes, the theoretical framework for this study was built upon the profound need for this attachment to exist. Therefore, the theoretical framework was built on the Attachment Theory as outlined by psychologist John Bowlby. It considers the importance of the attachment between a mother and a child and transfers the high regard into the relationship that must exist between a child and his or her first teacher. Exposing the fact that achievement among FDK students of poverty is greatly influenced by this attachment or relationship, it became clear to deeply understand the perceptions of FDK teachers

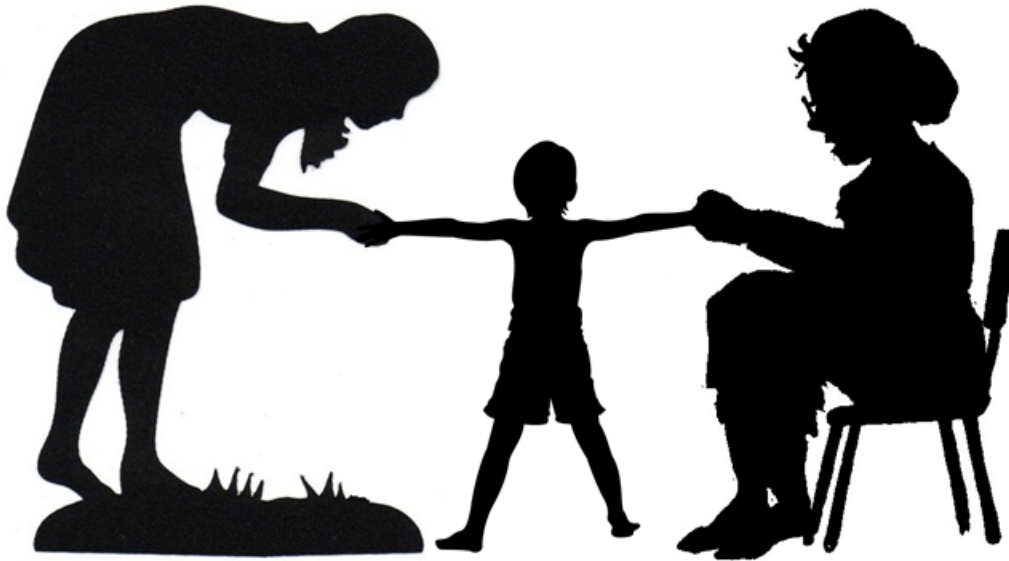


around this concept. Do they understand the power of the relationship between the teacher and the student? An illustration of the Theoretical Framework is shared in the figure below.

Figure 5

*Attachment Theory in the FDK Classroom*

## **John Bowlby's Attachment Theory**



### **Conclusion**

The literature clearly supports a correlation between poverty and poor achievement (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). The following themes were exposed as a result of the review of literature for posing the background and analyzing high-yield strategies:

- Poverty negatively impacts student learning.
- Students of poverty enter kindergarten with an academic deficit.
- FDK can level the playing field and begin to close the achievement gap.
- A growth mindset, versus a fixed mindset, is important for a teacher to cultivate.
- Instructional strategies can positively impact student growth and achievement.

- Formative assessment plays an important role in closing the achievement.
- Healthy teacher–student relationships positively impact student achievement.

The first theme focused on poverty and its adverse effect on student achievement (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). The literature base supports the negative impact of the lack of resources due to financial barriers (Becker, 2011), a lack of a mother’s education (Becker, 2011; Lacour & Tissington, 2011), and the lack of vocabulary development (Bass & Gerstl-Pepin, 2011). A disturbing concern of entering school as a child of poverty is having an achievement gap or opportunity gap, as it is clear that poverty negatively impacts student school readiness and student achievement (Fielding et al., 2007).

The natural consequence of the first theme is that the level of skill for kindergarten entry is lower among students of poverty when compared to their affluent peers which unveiled as the second theme (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Although most children enter kindergarten at or around the age of 5, their preparedness for formal education may vary (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education studied students in grades 3–5 in 71 high-poverty schools in 2001 and discovered that these students of poverty consistently scored lower on academic achievement tests than that of their affluent peers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

A third theme that surfaced is the need for FDK (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Becker, 2011; Campbell & Ramey, 1994). With the rigor of CCSS and further demands on students, a half-day program seems to be a thing of the past. Campbell and Ramey (1994) shared their analysis, confirming that early intervention promotes, at the minimum, a non-widening of the achievement

gap. It becomes the moral imperative to ensure that the first school experience available for all students (kindergarten) has the adequate time necessary to begin to close the achievement gap. Fielding et al. (2007) shared the Kennewick School District's model that yielded high levels of student growth and achievement. It accounted for things that did work and did not work, while moving toward the common goal of 90% of students meeting the benchmark in reading. A common finding for what worked was kindergarten expansion (Fielding et al., 2007).

A fourth theme came to fruition through the important work of Dweck (2006) and the notion of cultivating a growth mindset with students. When teachers praise the effort of students and support the idea that failure is permissible, students are not afraid to make mistakes and are more apt to learn and grow (Dweck, 2006). The natural consequence is nurturing resiliency and perseverance, which is especially important for students of poverty. Li-Grining et al. (2010) confirmed the importance of the role of perseverance in assisting in academic growth of students of poverty. Teachers can influence the mindset by providing positive feedback for effort and establishing a culture in which failure is a learning opportunity. This is where students are more prepared to learn and grow. Rather than praise the grade, it is recommended to praise the hard work that went into making the grade happen (Dweck, 2006; Gunderson et al., 2013; Jensen, 2008).

A subsequent theme is that of the positive impact of instructional strategies (Allington, 1991; Jensen, 2008; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Nye et al., 2004; Stronge et al., 2011). Allington (2006) shared that specific instructional strategies utilized by the teacher produce high results for closing the achievement gap and some produce greater results than others. Research has indicated that teacher strategies augment achievement, yet there seems to be a need for further

study to identify the specific strategies. Jensen (2008) pointed out general strategies, yet specificity could act as a catalyst toward further student success.

The use of formative assessment rose as a theme in closing the achievement gap (Athanases & Achinstein, 2003; Bakula, 2010; Grisham-Brown et al., 2006; Stiggins & DuFour, 2009). When teachers have an understanding of the level of performance of the students they are working with, they are better prepared to differentiate and meet the needs of the students. Stiggins and DuFour (2009) noted that achievement increased when formative assessment was used as a teacher practice among the service delivery model.

The importance of the relationship that exists between the classroom teacher and the student emerged as a final theme (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). O'Connor and McCartney (2007) reported that the teacher–student relationship is a critical attribute in advancing student achievement. Findings in this area would be helpful for future studies and understanding around the potential to close the achievement gap for young learners. Lee (2012) shared that schools that encourage teacher–student relationships and exert academic pressure to excel can encourage students to invest more effort into obtaining academic achievement. Engagement with teachers can help students develop a sense of pride and motivation to succeed in their academic endeavors (Lee, 2012).

An understanding of the themes and the importance of their relation to the success of students of poverty leads us to the theory which acts as a catalyst to the theoretical framework. Attachment theory was originally conceived by psychologist John Bowlby in the late 1960's and flourished as a viable concept through the progression of time. Bowlby (1982) posed that child development centered on the child's ability to form a secure relationship with their mother or immediate caregiver. This crucial bond is thought to provide the child with a secure base which

fosters increased learning and growth (Bowlby, 1982). Children who do not form a secure attachment may experience adverse developmental delays and difficulty forming positive, meaningful relationships. Research regarding the application of attachment theory has suggested that when children are unable to form secure attachment to their parent or primary caregiver a positive student-teacher relationship may provide the child the bond necessary to social and developmental growth (Buyse, Verschueren, & Doumen, 2011).

Environment also plays a critical role in fostering student-teacher relationships and academic achievement. Bowlby (1998) suggests the environment in which children interact in can greatly influence child responsiveness. For example, interactions within the classroom demonstrate to the child how he or she will be treated and how others will respond to his or her actions. Teachers play a role in whether children will choose to respond positively or negatively. Teachers who respond to students in an uncaring, insensitive manner may negatively or positively influence the direction of development a child may take.

The literature clearly articulates a strong correlation between poverty and poor achievement and supported the notion that the relationship between the teacher and student is a positive factor in closing the achievement gap (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Duchaine et al., 2011; Guo & Harris, 2000; Lee, 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pigford, 2001; Silva et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). However, the research is insufficient when it comes to digging deep into teacher perceptions around the importance of the relationship that exists between the teacher and the student. Greater insight into these perceptions, specifically with FDK teachers, will provide greater clarity in this area. Teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities within school districts can focus and emphasize this importance in a well-defined manner in anticipation of more effectively closing

the achievement gap. Therefore, the theoretical framework for this research is grounded in the concept of Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1988), and emphasizes the importance of extending the relationship from the caregiver to the child's first teacher. Understanding that the possibility for student success is elevated when the relationship between a child and the teacher is positive, it is paramount to gain insight into the perceptions of the FDK teacher around the value and role of this relationship.

## **Chapter III**

### **Design and Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Research indicates children who enter school with a lack of background knowledge have a more difficult time learning to read and write (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Oftentimes, the students who come into the school system without that background knowledge are the students of poverty. This researcher believes it is the educational system's moral imperative to purposefully engage in identifying themes in an early learning environment where student achievement success is noted and work toward duplicating those themes as part of a common practice.

The purpose of this study was to gain deep insight into the perceptions of full-day kindergarten (FDK) teachers regarding the role of the teacher–student relationship. Specifically, research has indicated that a positive relationship between a student and a teacher augments readiness to learn and overall achievement (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Duchaine et al., 2011; Guo & Harris, 2000; Lee, 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pigford, 2001; Silva et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). A qualitative approach was utilized to determine the in-depth perceptions of FDK teachers. The central research question acted as a guide for this study:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

#### **Research Design**

Findings indicated that certain practices elevate student achievement among students of poverty (Jensen, 2008; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Tomlinson, 2015). Examining

these practices in isolation assisted in developing this study's research question focusing on perceptions. This study investigated the perceptions of FDK with regard to the role of the teacher-student relationship among students of poverty. In order to identify the research design most closely aligned with seeking the answer to this study's research question, it was first necessary to understand methodologies. This researcher considered a quantitative, mixed-methods, and qualitative approach.

The diversity of research methods can give researchers the opportunity to explore and engage in various forms of research. However, the range of methods can also prove to be confusing to researchers as well (Taber, 2012). Researchers may find it difficult to assess which method is appropriate for their research question. Taber (2012) shares that challenges in research methods can discourage researchers from completing much needed educational research. Areas of study do not always fit in perfectly with a specific method and can thus be discouraging. Students often shape research design around four levels of analysis, which include "epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods" (p. 126). However, not all research can be neatly labeled by these guidelines. Taber (2012) provided quality pros and cons to using various research methods to effectively conduct educational research. These methods include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

Research is often questioned for reliability, replicability, and accurate, applicable conclusions from the findings. One method of ensuring accuracy is by utilizing quantifiable data that rely on statistical evidence. However, Smith (1990) argued that relying strictly on statistical data can leave out vital descriptive data provided by qualitative methods of research, which can be beneficial toward identifying more accurate conclusions. Although quantitative data are useful in research, qualitative data create the opportunity for researchers to describe and explore the



context of relationships (Smith, 1990). Quantitative data have the ability to impact educational decision making and improve research quality. They also provide educators the ability to overcome claims that educational research is ineffective and lacks validity. In developing research questions that utilize strict methods and measures for obtaining data, researchers can provide information that is replicable and generalizable (Simonson, 2005). Quantitative data gathering was rejected for this study due to the lack on in-depth knowledge it would provide.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) pose that mixed methods research can provide a dynamic and accurate measure from which human researchers can draw accurate conclusions. Another advantage of mixed research methods is that it may allow individuals to cross barriers between conducting research and the human ability to problem solve. Similar to individuals who problem-solve, mixed methods can provide researcher the ability to use various methods to access knowledge and use this information to create change. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) believe that mixed methods can be used to problem solve within schools and positively shape student growth by clearly identifying obstacles and focusing research around solutions. Mixed methods can provide the flexibility needed to evolve with change within schools. Although the benefits to this methodology are profound, it was rejected for this study.

Qualitative research can consist of interviews, observations, and review of documentation (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 1990). Research gathered from qualitative data can provide the ability to expand interdisciplinary knowledge and create greater impact documentation (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 1990). One form of qualitative research is that of Phenomenology. According to Creswell (2013), Phenomenological research seeks to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a certain situation or phenomenon. It seeks to develop common meaning among several individuals while taking into consideration their lived

experiences (Moustakas, 1994). By examining numerous viewpoints of the same condition, a researcher can begin to make some generalizations of what something is like as an experience from the 'insider's' perspective. The objective is the focused inquiry and report of phenomena as they are deliberately experienced, with the absence of theories about the fundamental descriptions or their objective reality. It investigates experiences as they are lived by those participating in them, and the meaning that these people ascribe to them. Phenomenology acts under the premise that critical truths about reality are grounded in people's lived experiences. These lived experiences are unveiled through interviews (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013).

Interviews are selected by researchers for various reasons depending on the nature of their research hypothesis. It is the nature of the hypothesis that dictates the structure of the interview questions and how the data collected are analyzed (Creswell, 2012; Seidman, 2013; Smith, 1990). Structure may vary from adhering to strict, standardized guidelines to a less rigid format that encourages and evokes meaning and understanding from participants. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), there are three main methods used for conducting interviews: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured.

When researchers collect qualitative data using interviews, they most likely will choose the unstructured and semi-structured forms. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) referred to structured interviews as a combination of observations and informal interviews. The researchers collect data from their observations and then are able to give data meaning through "guided conversations" (p. 315). Semi-structured interviews differ from structured interviews in that they are generally organized, structured, and held in designated locations. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that individual in-depth interviews would also be an appropriate method that could be used to gather qualitative data. This method requires researchers to formulate a

focused research question in order to find connections from data received through the interview process. Individual in-depth interviews can provide researchers with the ability to capture data about shared experiences of individuals.

For the purpose of this research, qualitative data through individual interviews allowed a thorough investigation of teacher perception. It provided an opportunity to gain greater teacher insight about what teachers believe regarding the relationship between a teacher and a student and its influence on achievement with students of poverty in an FDK setting. Quantitative research tells the story of the numbers, and qualitative research provides deeper understanding (Merriam, 1995; Tanner, 2012). In order to answer this research question, qualitative inquiry was the viable option.

The research design involved the use of qualitative research methods in addressing the research question. The methodology involved investigation of the perceptions of FDK teachers who have taught students of poverty, based on a minimum school percentage of free and reduced lunch of 65%. Qualitative methodology was best suited for this study because, as Rossman and Rallis (1998) stated, “there are few truths that constitute universal knowledge; rather, there are multiple perspectives about the world” (p. 29). Through understanding the perceptions of the child’s first teacher, it was possible to obtain “multiple perspectives” that further the understanding of the perceived belief of the role of the teacher–student relationship. Merriam (1998) noted that qualitative research offers “the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education,” because it is “focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied” (p. 1).

This design was selected due to the in-depth approach individual interviews can offer (Creswell, 2014). It provided a clear way to identify teacher perceptions around the role of

teacher–student relationships. Using qualitative data allowed the researcher the in-depth understanding necessary to answer the research question (Creswell, 2012).

### Participants

The nine participants for this study were teachers who have been teaching in a public school setting for five or more years and a minimum of three of the five years were in a Title I school. The target group was identified to ensure enough experience to validate a certain level of expertise. In this study, participants were:

- FDK classroom teachers,
- from two urban school districts in neighboring cities,
- a minimum of one male,
- experienced (classroom teacher for a minimum of 5 years), and
- from a state-identified Title I School.

Table 2 provides consolidated information regarding the teacher name, age, years of service and highest degree earned as a means to understand the profile of each participant. As demonstrated in the table, these factors demonstrate demographic diversity within the identified areas.

Table 2

#### *Participant Demographic Information*

<b>Teacher Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Number Years as Teacher</b>	<b>Highest Level Degree Achieved</b>
Mrs. Simmons	47	16	Bachelor's
Mrs. Fredrick	59	36	Bachelor's
Mrs. Rennick	31	9	Master's
Mrs. Blandon	56	35	Master's
Mr. Vincent	40	10	Master's
Mrs. Kronk	49	20	Master's
Mrs. Tennison	53	30	Master's
Ms. Menson	28	5	Bachelor's
Mrs. Clemons	36	9	Master's

A significant requirement of this study was to use two large school districts in an urban setting. This would help to ensure a teacher participant perspective that was viewed through the lens of supporting students representing a larger community as opposed to a more rural type of setting. Both participating districts are among the largest 10 districts in the state one is among the top three. The size of the districts are represented in Table 3.

Table 3

*School District Information*

School District	Total Enrollment 05/2015	Number of Traditional “Brick-and-Mortar” Schools		
		Elementary	Middle/Jr. High	High School
Panera	22,094	21	7	4
Tempura	29,348	35	10	8

An important feature of this study was to select two school districts that represent an expansive population to ensure diversity among the demographics and most importantly, the potential for specific schools to demonstrate a minimum of 50% poverty level. Two large school districts would promote a rich, challenging, and pragmatic experience on behalf of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect the true identity of the districts within their given location. Proximity was also an important feature for the researcher to accommodate travel on a practical level and promote a sense of varied experiences from participants that would also obtain certain similarities. It is essential to have greater understanding as to the complete demographics that compose the intricacies found within each of the participating districts.

Panera School District is located in the Pacific Northwest and covers a large span of geographic miles with schools located on sparsely covered tree lined streets and others located near main roadways. As a district, it does not meet the criterion requirement of 50% free and

reduced lunch, with that number being 35.3%. However, the individual schools of the participants do meet this important socioeconomic necessity for this study. Panera reflects a level of diversity ethnically, yet is not as diverse as Tempura School District. An understanding of the demographic profile is an important aspect of the study. Panera School District has 62.7% white students with the second largest group being Hispanic/Latino at 15.2%. Tables 4 displays the greater detail as to the specific demographic elements found within Tempura School District.

Table 4

*District Enrollment Demographic**Panera School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	21,640	
May 2015 Student Count	21,759	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	11,219	51.8%
<b>Female</b>	10,421	48.2%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	3,280	15.2%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	191	0.9%
Asian	1,017	4.7%
Black / African American	775	3.6%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	282	1.3%
White	13,575	62.7%
Two or More Races	2,520	11.6%

**Panera School District Special Programs Demographics**

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	7,686	35.3%
Special Education (May 2015)	2,782	12.8%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	740	3.4%
Migrant (May 2015)	28	0.1%
Section 504 (May 2015)	1,139	5.2%
Foster Care (May 2015)	176	0.8%

Tempura School District is also located in the Pacific Northwest and covers a large span of geographic miles. Schools are located along the coast of the Puget Sound, on residential tree lined streets and others located near the main interstate. As a district, it does meet the criterion requirement of 50% free and reduced lunch with a poverty level represented as 63.5% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. A significant note is the fact that the individual schools of the participants far exceed this important socioeconomic criterion, as this adds a dynamic that augments rigor and richness. The Tempura School District reflects a high level of diversity academically, ethnically, and Special Education populations. Table 5 is essential to the study, as it provides greater detail as to the specific demographic elements found within Tempura School District and deepens the understanding about the district.

Table 5

## District Enrollment Demographics

*Tempura School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	29,439	
May 2015 Student Count	29,254	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	14,977	50.9%
<b>Female</b>	14,462	49.1%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	5,420	18.4%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	361	1.2%
Asian	2,965	10.1%
Black / African American	5,615	19.1%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	770	2.6%
White	12,474	42.4%
Two or More Races	1,834	6.2%

## Tempura Special Programs Demographics

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	18,583	63.5%
Special Education (May 2015)	4,032	13.8%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	2,878	9.8%
Migrant (May 2015)	21	0.1%
Section 504 (May 2015)	729	2.5%
Foster Care (May 2015)	314	1.1%

*Note.* The demographic information used by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has been displayed to provide greater district insight.

### Data Collection

The Northwest Nazarene University Internal Human Research Review Committee (HRRC) approved the collection of the data and proper procedures were followed to ensure the ethics of this study according to the HRRC regulations, as evidenced by Appendix A. Family Education Rights and Privacy Act regulations were followed and all participants were notified of the purpose of the study, which was clearly defined.

Each superintendent in the identified urban districts was sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and requesting permission to interview teachers in the respective district. It was also necessary to fill out a request-to-conduct-research packet for each of the identified school districts. A superintendent's informed consent form (Appendix E) was acquired with signatures.

Each district supplied their teachers with individual e-mail accounts and a teacher computer with Internet access. The researcher obtained a copy of names and e-mail addresses for the district's FDK teachers from the school's website in each district where permission was obtained. Following the receipt of the superintendent consent forms (Appendix B and Appendix C) and an elapsed time of four months, an e-mail (Appendix D) was sent to all targeted FDK teachers introducing the researcher and sharing the purpose of the study. The letter also provided



assurance of confidentiality throughout the study. The targeted FDK teachers were selected because it was believed that they contained the necessary elements listed below as a fulfillment for purposeful sampling based on the following criteria:

- FDK classroom teachers,
- pre-identified urban school districts in neighboring cities,
- minimum of one male
- the teachers held a minimum of five years' experience and
- the teachers were working (or had a minimum of three years' experience) in a state-identified Title I School.

This process involved identifying and selecting individuals that were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with this specific phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Through the identification and selection process, this identification was not challenging, as the authenticity and transparency of the participants was revealed through early communications.

The invitation to participate in the study informed FDK teachers their responses would help determine the extent to which they perceived the role of the relationship between a teacher and a student influenced achievement among students of poverty. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and the participants were informed that they could decline participation at any time during the interview process. Potential respondents were assured that the identity of the districts and participants involved in the study would be protected (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Throughout this study, individual information was treated with extreme discretion and caution.

The researcher selected a semi-structured interview approach with questions consisting of several key components designed to help outline the areas to be investigated, but also allowed

the interviewee to deviate in an effort to track a concept or response in greater detail. This interview format provided the flexibility necessary to get at the heart of the perceptions, especially when compared to the linear design of structured interviews (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). It also provided an opportunity for detection or expansion of evidence that was important to participants but may not have previously been thought of as relevant by the researcher.

The following methodology was used for collecting data:

- The location for the interviews was pre-determined and was typically the school setting
- A general statement about research and the intent to audio record was shared with participant and this agreement was then recorded
- A purpose statement and an explicit thank you for participation was verbally shared with the interviewee
- Basic demographic information was gathered
- Open-ended interview questions with researcher
- Interviews were audio-recorded
- Findings were documented
- Member check took place via email
- A second interview took place either in person or via conference call

The piloting process is important in filtering the questions, predicting any inquiries that may arise from the instrument, and strengthening the research (Tanner, 2012). The self-created and open-ended interview questions were piloted with four teachers who were not associated with the grade level or the building site where the research was conducted. A pilot study was

implemented to evaluate the viability of the interview questions and define the necessity of future prompts needed to increase and optimize insight. It is through this process that effectiveness was evaluated. Four participants were used to pilot the interview questions because it provided ample information to effectively revise the questions for subsequent interviews among the identified participants. Table 6 provides a synopsis of the pseudonyms of teachers who were interviewed and took part in the pilot process.

Table 6

*Pilot Participant Demographics*

Teacher	Gender	Education	Experience
Ms. Kereen (two times)	Female	Master's in Education	28 years
Ms. Sanduski	Female	Bachelor's in Education	32 years
Ms. Compton	Female	Bachelor's in Education	12 years

The successes and challenges presented during the pilot phase allowed for the data gathering during the research phase to be more complete, targeted and assisted the researcher in altering questions for a more viable and in-depth study.

**Analytical Methods**

In order to select the proper data analysis, the researcher must have a deep understanding of the type of data collected. When understanding the data collected, the researcher then

interprets and finds meaning. The analysis includes the summary of data, and interpretation involves finding meaning in those data (Hogue, 2012).

This qualitative study utilizing a phenomenological approach attempted to elicit key perceptions of full-day kindergarten teachers in relation to the role of the teacher-student relationship and its impact on student achievement among students of poverty. This study facilitated a profoundly intense account of the perceptions of nine teachers who met specific criteria. The data gathered in this study was the result of semi-structured interviews with 9 teachers for a total of eighteen teacher interviews (Appendix G).

Key words and phrases were coded and categorized using a sort system of descriptive coding, thereby using single words to describe a thought or concept. The frequencies and percentages of those key words and phrases were tallied to provide a numerical frequency distribution. Quotes were used to illustrate key ideas and beliefs the researcher thought to be profound.

The analytical design included the following elements:

- Analysis of audio-recordings
- Analysis of demographic information
- The ability to examine and analyze interview information from the first interview, the member-check, the second interview, as well as the second member check
- Cultivating deep understanding of the responses to the interview questions
- Gaining general awareness of emerging themes
- Coding—self-coding through descriptive analysis
- Analyzing themes—the coding process will expose consistencies and those consistencies will be identified as themes

Purposeful sampling was implemented in this study to identify the teacher participants for the semi-structured interviews according to a set of identified criteria. This promoted an opportunity for rich dialogue in an effort to gain greater insight into the phenomenology, or experience of the full-day kindergarten teacher. The qualitative data gathered in the semi-structured interviews was used to clarify participants' individual beliefs and experiences. Interviews allowed the researcher to hear the stories and ideas of the individual teachers, with the intended outcome of revealing similarities and gathering information to expose themes. The semi-structured interviews enabled the teachers to express their personal experiences in rich detail so as to better irradiate both the perceived importance of the student-teacher relationship and its impact on student achievement. As a means to ensure the proper representation of responses was captured, member check took place after the transcription was finalized (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This offered an opportunity for participants to provide feedback and to validate the information found within the transcript.

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered in the 18 teacher interviews was completed following word for word recorded transcription of the semi-structured interviews by an outside agency. Each set of responses to the questions were analyzed separately. The analysis commenced with the researcher surveying, analyzing, and reading through the transcripts several times with the intent of submerging herself in the finite details of each response as well as to gain a global understanding of the preliminary findings.

Throughout this process, notes were recorded in the form of key concepts or themes, short phrases, and ideas in the margins of each transcript. Key words were underlined, and the researcher identified immediate thoughts and reflections regarding the contents of the message of the participants. Several preliminary themes "emerged" from this process. During analysis,

Creswell (2013) suggests, “The process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information” (p. 184). Next, to elicit increased analysis, all teacher responses for each question were organized into separate individual tabs within one spreadsheet with a final tab containing all responses. Each teacher name was listed in alphabetical order in the first column with the corresponding responses for each question in the subsequent column cells to the right. This provided an ease of analysis of the teacher responses by question and promoted the ease of reading from the top to the bottom. As the reading of teacher responses divided by question continued, the unveiling of themes naturally grew, as did the process that Creswell (2013) refers to as “winnowing” (p. 184). After a list of nine initial themes was developed, the process to reduce the total number of themes took place through increased “winnowing” (Creswell, 2013 p. 184). Next came the process of interpreting the data. Synthesizing the information to obtain useful and usable information in an attempt to summarize the findings into useful themes. Creswell (2013) points out that “Interpretation in qualitative research involves abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (p. 187). The analysis allowed the researcher to review the themes through a critical lens in order to gain understanding of the findings. The process of interpretation led to a reduction of themes, moving from nine, to four. This was accomplished by identifying differences and similarities among the responses, eliminating and combining

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2013) noted that researchers “always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research” (p. 15). Merriam (1995) expressed concerns about research including a sample population due to the transferability to the larger population as a whole. Results in this study are limited to nine teachers within a few elementary buildings in two

neighboring school districts. This limits the findings and some may argue that the sample may not be large enough to generalize the findings. Participants in this study who volunteered were presumed to have communicated openly and honestly about their perceptions. Another limitation may exist due to the fact that a current class of students or a recent class of students may have presented more than typical challenges to one or more of the participating teachers and their responses may have impacted the results of this study. Finally, although the participants in this study came from different schools, it was assumed that common themes would emerge in their experiences with teaching students in a FDK setting.

## Chapter IV

### Results

#### Introduction

It is agreed that children who enter school with a lack of background knowledge have a more difficult time learning to read and write (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). It is also agreed that the students who come into the school system without that background knowledge are often the students of poverty. This researcher believes it is the educational system's moral imperative to purposefully engage in identifying themes in an early learning environment where student achievement success is noted and work toward duplicating those themes as part of a common practice. The themes eliciting success were thoroughly reviewed in chapter two during the literature review. The literature revealed the perilous need for a positive relationship between the teacher and student to exist in order to reach the impetus of maximum learning and growth. This researcher immediately thought of the experience of kindergarten as the genesis to the formal learning model and pondered the notion of whether full day kindergarten teachers held this notion in high regard, or any regard at all.

The purpose of this study was to gain deep insight into the perceptions of full-day kindergarten (FDK) teachers regarding the role of the teacher–student relationship. Specifically, research has indicated that a positive relationship between a student and a teacher augments readiness to learn and overall achievement (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Duchaine et al., 2011; Guo & Harris, 2000; Lee, 2012; O'Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pigford, 2001; Silva et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). A qualitative approach through phenomenology was utilized to determine the in-depth perceptions of FDK teachers. Creswell (2013), postulates that



phenomenological research seeks to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a certain situation or phenomenon. It seeks to develop common meaning among several individuals while taking into consideration their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The central research question acted as a guide for this study:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

As discussed in Chapter III, the researcher utilized the following methods for data collection:

- A semi-structured interview approach with questions consisting of several key components designed to help outline the areas to be investigated, but also allowed the interviewee to deviate in an effort to track a concept or response in greater detail (Appendix G).
- Interviews were audio-recorded via Dropvox and immediately placed into a shared folder, providing access to the transcriber. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the process including a confidentiality agreement held between the transcriber and the researcher (Appendix J).
- Transcripts were prepared and were thoroughly reviewed by the researcher while underlining key words, topics, and phrases. Emerging themes were noted.
- Findings were documented in an Excel spreadsheet under individual tabs for each participant, with the frequency of a theme tallied under the heading of the theme through the creation of an Excel formula.

- The individual responses were then merged into one tab of the spreadsheet. Coding parameters were established to set an auto response for tallying the frequencies within the spreadsheet.
- The tallies were summed for totals to identify the final four themes and the percentage in which they were identified.
- Reflective note-taking took place on the transcript when the researcher noted potential follow-up questions or saw evidence of the need to clarify something (see Appendix N).
- Member check took place via email whereby transcripts were shared and emerging themes were noted.
- A second set of interview questions were designed to ensure consistent thoughts were gathered from the participants and to dig deeper where more information was required.
- A second interview took place either in person or via conference call. Further coding continued.

## **Results**

This chapter outlines the results of the study. Data was organized in a manner that reflected a connection between the question being asked and the response to the research question. The interview questions were designed to get at the core of the research purpose, while allowing the participants to tell their story. It is imperative to display the questions asked of the participants so the reader has complete awareness of the framework that prompted and elicited the results the researcher utilized to identify themes. Those questions are found in Table 7 represented below.

Table 7

*Interview Questions Used During the First Set of Interviews*

<b>Question #</b>	<b>Question</b>
1	Please say your name.
2	What is your age?
3	What school do you teach at?
4	Reflect back on why you decided to become a teacher and talk about this experience.
5	Tell me how you make the classroom successful for all children.
6	Tell me about a difficult student and how you dealt with him or her.
7	Tell me about your behavior management plan and procedures?
8	Give me 3 – 5 examples about what motivates students in your class?
9	Do you include student interest topics in your lessons? Why or why not? (prompt/elaborate)
10	How would your students describe you as a teacher?
11	How do you know if students feel accepted by you?
12	What do you do to help students meet success?
13	How do you help the silent child develop a voice?

Themes began to emerge almost immediately during the early analysis of the transcripts. It was important to begin coding in order to identify areas of emphasis as well as areas where repeat responses were present and void. Capturing the essence of the information that was revealed through the questioning process was profound for the researcher. As the theme data was revealed in the coding spreadsheet, the awareness of initial perceptions acquired during the

interview did not always match up with what the more objective coding process unveiled. Closely examining the emerging themes was an important part of the process for a variety of reasons including eliminating bias, gaining insight into the direction of the findings, and finally, capturing the need(s) for the outcome of the second set of interviews.

Through continued review of the transcripts, this researcher was prepared to more deeply understand what the responses to the questions were revealing. The participants were incredibly thoughtful, candid, and yet deliberate in their responses. It was an honor to converse and learn from each person in the diverse environment in a one on one setting. As the coding continued, it was discovered that the original nine emerging themes were exhibiting overlap as related to context, response, and categories. It was at this point that the process Creswell (2013) refers to as “winnowing” became very clear (p. 184). The process to reduce the total number of emerging themes from nine somewhat isolated themes took place through increased “winnowing” (Creswell, p. 184), continued reflection and further analysis (see Appendix N). The reduction to a manageable number of four final themes was accomplished by identifying differences and similarities among the responses, reviewing the nine isolated emerging themes, and through eliminating and combining.

The identification of four major themes in this study were revealed with clarity and confidence. These themes were the results of 18 one-on-one interviews with nine participants from two neighboring school districts. The themes are outlined below:

1. Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
2. The teacher’s ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.

3. Student management as a means to elicit student success.
4. The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.

The results from the Panera and Tempura School Districts combined revealed that the perception of the full-day kindergarten teachers placed the highest level of impact on the teacher's use of instructional strategies such as differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practice with 320 responses equating to 32% of the overall responses. This was followed by 232 responses supporting the notion of the importance of the classroom atmosphere consisting of features such as cultivating trust and demonstrating flexibility. The next closest theme was the use of student management as a means to elicit academic success with 223 responses, or 23%. Finally, with 207 responses, the relationship between the teacher and student as a critical feature to advance student achievement was the theme with the lowest percentage at 21%. Table 8 provides a display of the theme, the number of times the theme was represented and the total percentage for that theme.

Table 8

*Display of the Themes of Panera and Tempura School Districts*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Times Theme Represented</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices	320	32%
Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement	232	24%
Student management as a means to elicit student success	223	23%
The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement	207	21%

The results from the Panera School District individually revealed that the perception of the full-day kindergarten teachers placed the highest level of impact on the teacher's use of instructional strategies such as differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practice with 198 responses equating to 36% of the overall responses. This was followed by 132 responses (24%) supporting the notion of the importance of the classroom atmosphere consisting of features such as cultivating trust and demonstrating flexibility. The next closest theme was the relationship between the teacher and student as a critical feature to advance student achievement with 122 responses representing 22%. Finally, the theme with the lowest number of responses (103) at 18% was student management as a mode to elicit success. Table 9 provides a display of the theme, the number of times the theme was represented and the total percentage for that theme for the Panera School District independently.

Table 9

*Display of Themes for the Panera School District*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Times Theme Represented</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.	198	36%
Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.	132	24%
The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.	122	22%
Student management as a means to elicit student success.	103	18%
The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.	122	22%

The findings from the Tempura School District individually revealed that the perception of the full-day kindergarten teachers placed the highest level of impact on the notion of the importance of the classroom atmosphere consisting of features such as cultivating trust and demonstrating flexibility with 122 responses equating to 29%. A very close second theme with 120 responses representing 28% was student management as a means to elicit success among students of poverty. The data takes a significant decline in responses when moving to the third theme of the importance of the classroom atmosphere consisting of features such as cultivating trust and demonstrating flexibility with 100 responses representing 23%. The final remaining theme with 85 responses representing 20% was the relationship between the teacher and student as a critical feature to advance student achievement. Table 10 provides a display of the theme, the number of times the theme was represented and the total percentage for that theme for the Tempura School District.

Table 10

*Display of Themes for the Tempura School District*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Times Theme Represented</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.	100	23%
The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.	122	29%
Student management as a means to elicit student success.	120	28%
The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.	85	20%

Understanding the data profile of the two school districts individually holds an equal importance in order to identify themes that may be connected, or correlated to, specific

demographic profiles. A third strand of equal, or perhaps even greater importance, is to recognize the results of the individual participants. Qualitative research, by design, gathers non numerical data which is used to increase meaning and understanding of the human condition (O'Reilly & Parker, n.d.). In an effort to understand the responses of the participants at a sophisticated level and intimately acquaint ourselves with their contribution to the overall findings, the researcher will capitalize on the results of the participants by sharing them individually through their unique stories. In addition, as the results of the individual participants are disclosed, it is imperative to examine the demographic profile specific to the participating schools as a means to provide greater insight. Ultimately, this delivers a more thorough canvas into the qualitative research known as phenomenology.

Two of the participants in this study teach at Farrell Elementary School located in the Panera School District. When comparing the two schools from this participating district, it is fair to note that this school has a higher percentage of non-white students and a larger number of English Language Learner (ELL) students compared to the other participating school in this district. This school also has the highest number of attending students within Panera School District, but not when compared to all other schools participating in this study. Table 11 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Farrell Elementary School.

Table 11

*Farrell Elementary School Demographic Profile located in the Panera School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	545	
May 2015 Student Count	570	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	304	55.8%
<b>Female</b>	241	44.2%



<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	192	35.2%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	0.6%
Asian	34	6.2%
Black / African American	23	4.2%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	11	2.0%
White	223	40.9%
Two or More Races	59	10.8%

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	361	63.3%
Special Education (May 2015)	70	12.3%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	117	20.5%
Migrant (May 2015)	7	1.2%
Section 504 (May 2015)	24	4.2%
Foster Care (May 2015)	N<10	

It is imperious to note that the demographics reveal meaningful information about Farrell Elementary School and provide a sense for the basic infrastructure when considering the demographic framework. This paves the way to the introduction of the two teachers participating in this study from this school, Mrs. Simmons and Mr. Vincent.

Mrs. Simmons teaches at Farrell Elementary School in the Panera School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 47 years old and has been teaching for 16 years. Mrs. Simmons earned her Bachelor's degree at a state university. Currently, Mrs. Simmons holds a Multiple Subject Teaching Credential K-12 certificate and is endorsed in Elementary Education and ELL. She has spent most of her career supporting students of high needs and shared a passion for this specific type of work. Mrs. Simmons confidently reported that she could not see herself working in an environment that did not have students from diverse backgrounds.

Mrs. Simmons was happy to participate and contribute to this study. The anecdotes she shared about her students over the course of the interviews were met with laughter and fondness.

Mrs. Simmons shared that teaching is the job she is meant to be doing and would not choose anything different. While the statement was overt, her tone and passion confirmed the very words she spoke. When referencing past or current students, Mrs. Simmons was animated, jovial, and sincere. She shared how imperative it is to make students feel like they are important and the necessity of connecting academic topics to ideas or concepts that interest students. In fact, she spoke of how easy it was to do that when her son was younger, and now she relies on colleagues who have young children to keep her in the know on current topics of interest for young children. She also spoke freely of the need to provide specific feedback and praise to reinforce behaviors and cultivate positive self-esteem (see Appendix P).

I love praise. Good job. Look at that. Oh, you are hot stuff. Get up and show everybody. I try to write them a morning message every day. I try to include something that I know they like. I got a happy meal last night. Do you know where I went? But, yeah, anything that's going to grab their interest. When we do our shared writing, I try to talk about stories about my dog, or something that I know that they can connect with.

Mr. Vincent also teaches at Farrell Elementary School in the Panera School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. He is 40 years old and has been teaching for 10 years. Mr. Vincent earned his Bachelor's degree at a state university and his Master's degree at a private university. Currently, Mr. Vincent holds a K-8 certificate. Mr. Vincent started his working career working in business, but quickly discovered the void of fulfillment. He specifically chose teaching because of the impact he could have on individual students as well as the future.

Mr. Vincent was an eager and enthusiastic participant in this study. He shared his enjoyment of drama and music and provided anecdotes that demonstrated how he integrates both of those arts into his classroom whenever possible. He plays his guitar in the classroom and the

students love it. Having four kids of his own is something he attributes to helping him apply differentiation and empathy in the classroom. Mr. Vincent freely spoke of the need to meet each child where they are academically and help them grow to the next level that is appropriate to that individual (see Appendix P).

They might need to have a reading mastery group, a small group that's in the -- that's in the title room or in my classroom. They might need some Language for Learning just to get used to using words, um, and so, um -- so that's another way that I help students to meet success is by really keeping -- by giving them that real-world feedback, I'm also very much in tune with how they're performing.

Two of the participants in this study teach full day kindergarten at Bales Elementary School located in the Tempura School District. Among the four schools from this district, this school has the second highest percentage of non-white students and out of all of the participating schools, Bales has the highest percentage (33.3%) of ELL students. Bales has the third highest number of student full time equivalent (FTE) when compared to all other participating schools and is tied with Mandeville Elementary School at 85.5% in their free and reduced lunch rates, comparatively. Table 12 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Bales Elementary School.

Table 12

*Bales Elementary School Demographic Profile located in the Tempura School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	494	
May 2015 Student Count	513	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	255	51.6%
<b>Female</b>	239	48.4%

<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	162	32.8%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	8	1.6%
Asian	59	11.9%
Black / African American	92	18.6%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	16	3.2%
White	136	27.5%
Two or More Races	21	4.3%

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	440	85.5%
Special Education (May 2015)	75	14.6%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	174	33.9%
Migrant (May 2015)	0	0.0%
Section 504 (May 2015)	5	1.0%
Foster Care (May 2015)	N<10	

Mrs. Fredrick teaches at Bales Elementary School in the Tempura School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 59 years old and has been teaching for 36 years. Mrs. Fredrick earned her Bachelor's degree at a state university. Currently, Mrs. Fredrick holds a 5th year certificate. It was clear from the beginning that Mrs. Fredrick holds teaching in high regard and considers it to be a “calling.”

Mrs. Fredrick was graciously accepting of the invitation to participate in this study and met the interview questions with sincerity, thoughtfulness, and enthusiasm. Mrs. Frederick considerably referred to teaching as an opportunity to make a bigger difference. She warmly and introspectively communicated about the exponential long term rewards found, and hoped for, in teaching. Her classroom set up included an imagination play area for students and displayed kid friendly terminology throughout. Mrs. Fredrick freely spoke of the importance of systems, structure, and predictability in the classroom for students of poverty. Consistency was another important feature that Mrs. Fredrick elaborated on as a means to help students be successful. She

also discussed the importance of understanding where a student's academic baseline is and providing a differentiated approach to help them learn (see Appendix O).

So they know that with me, things are the same, and if they're not going to be the same, I'll warn them ahead of time. So there's that structure, um, they know what to expect. I tell them, this is the outcome. This is what I want to see. We're readers. This is what we're learning. Everybody look at our learning targets. Say the learning target with me. Um, this is what we're doing. I'll know you've learned it by doing this. Now, turn to somebody next to you so they're aware of what's happening.

Mrs. Rennick teaches at Bales Elementary School in Tempura School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 31 years old and has been teaching for 9 years. Mrs. Rennick holds a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree. Currently, Mrs. Rennick holds a K-8 certificate and is endorsed in Elementary Education. She professed that at the age of five years old she knew she wanted to be a teacher and never wanted to be anything else.

Mrs. Rennick was happy to participate in this study. She confidently and without waiver shared that teaching is the job for her. She chose teaching for a purpose and specifically enjoys kindergarten due to the influence over helping young students learn and grow. Mrs. Rennick also passionately spoke about her strong desire to work with students of diversity in high need environments. She thoughtfully and confidently discussed the importance of understanding where a student is performing academically and the importance of utilizing of variety of strategies to help him or her attain proficiency (see Appendix O).

I have kids who come in who, you know, seem to know quite a bit, as far as academics and social- emotional behavior go, and then I have kids who know nothing.

We just finished working on spiders, so one child brought a picture in from home, where

they took a picture of a spider in a spider web. So instead of doing the lesson I was going to do that day, we talked about that picture, and we drew what we observed and, you know, talked about how our books are connected to that picture. So, letting them bring things from home or give experiences from home.

One participant in this study teaches full day kindergarten at Sutter Elementary School located in the Tempura School District. Among the four schools from this district, Sutter has the second highest percentage of white students at 28% and out of all the schools, it has the second lowest number of ELL students. Sutter has the second to the lowest number of student FTE when compared to other participating schools within the same district at 291 students. The free and reduced lunch rates are 84.1% respectively. Table 13 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Sutter Elementary School.

Table 13

*Sutter Elementary School Demographic Profile located in the Tempura School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	291	
May 2015 Student Count	296	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	147	50.5%
<b>Female</b>	144	49.5%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	45	15.5%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	5	1.7%
Asian	6	2.1%
Black / African American	110	37.8%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	12	4.1%
White	83	28.5%
Two or More Races	30	10.3%

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	249	84.1%
Special Education (May 2015)	87	29.4%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	20	6.8%
Migrant (May 2015)	0	0.0%
Section 504 (May 2015)	2	0.7%
Foster Care (May 2015)	N<10	

Mrs. Blandon teaches at Sutter Elementary School in Tempura School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 56 years old and has been teaching for 35 years. Mrs. Blandon earned her Bachelor's degree at a state university and her Master's degree at a private university. She fondly spoke of her father who served as a principal and her mother who served as a Home Economics teacher. Mrs. Burrows shared of the history of one of her grandmothers teaching another grandmother. All of this combined helped shape her desire to become a teacher.

Mrs. Blandon graciously accepted the invitation to participate in this study. She started the school year with approximately 35 students in her classroom and her numbers decreased to more manageable numbers just prior to her first interview. She was positive, upbeat and engaging, despite having had such a high number of students in her classroom. The space in Mrs. Blandon's classroom demonstrated extreme organization, displays of student work, and exuded flow and structure. Ms. Blandon's classroom had thoughtful details such as tennis balls cut and placed on the bottom of chairs so that they would not make noise when moved. A constant theme throughout Ms. Blandon's responses was the importance of the relationship of the families. She shared many examples of connecting with families outside of the school day or even years later when students would come back to volunteer. She also discussed the importance of understanding what a student needs academically and figuring out what resources and strategies will help that individual needs to be successful (see Appendix O).

In my room right now, of my 20 students, I have taught, at least ten of them, a sibling or a

parent. So for me, they know me. If I'm outside, I can look around and the parents just know who I am. And I've kind of established a reputation, you know, of being a routine, strong teacher, but, um, I think that for teachers, that's what you need to do, you know, be there. I'm at every PTA function. The families know that I'm a Chicago Bear fan.

Chicago Cub fan. I probably have more parents come to my room to volunteer than any other teacher because I enjoy it. I want parents in here. I have grandparents this year, two grandparents come, and it was wonderful.

One participant in this study teaches FDK at Daily Elementary School located in the Tempura School District. This school has the lowest percentage of non-white students and out of all the schools, Daily has the fewest number of ELL students. Daily also has the lowest number of student FTE when compared to all other participating schools with approximately 276 students. When examining free and reduced lunch rates, Daily has the lowest threshold at 50%. Table 14 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Daily Elementary School.

Table 14

*Daily Elementary School Demographic Profile located in District 2*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	276	
May 2015 Student Count	276	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	136	49.3%
<b>Female</b>	140	50.7%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	31	11.2%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	1.1%
Asian	15	5.4%
Black / African American	42	15.2%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	1	0.4%
White	162	58.7%
Two or More Races	22	8.0%



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<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	141	51.1%
Special Education (May 2015)	30	10.9%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	5	1.8%
Migrant (May 2015)	0	0.0%
Section 504 (May 2015)	12	4.3%
Foster Care (May 2015)	N<10	

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Mrs. Kronk teaches at Daily Elementary School in the Tempura School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 49 years old and has been teaching for 20 years. Mrs. Kronk holds a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree. Currently, Mrs. Kronk has a K-8 certificate and is endorsed in Early Childhood Education. It is with great fondness and adoration that Mrs. Kronk shared the reason she became a teacher is because of all the great role models in her life related to education. She first spoke of Mr. Caulville and the impact he had on her life as a math teacher who she subsequently supported as a teacher's assistant. It was the connection to Mr. Caulville and others that provided a glimpse into the impact educating students could have on lives and the future that prompted Mrs. Kronk to choose teaching.

Mrs. Kronk was eager to participate in this study due to her passionate desire to support education in a more global manner. Her responses were consistently thoughtful and purposefully shared. Mrs. Kronk shared that this is not only her job, it is her career and it is what she is meant to be doing. She fondly highlighted stories about her own experiences regarding relationships with her educators and how she is carrying that meaningful experience into her own teaching. Mrs. Kronk discussed the value she places on cultivating relationships with her students and how she believes it is those very relationships that are a major catalyst toward promoting student achievement. Mrs. Kronk enjoys mentoring student teachers and other new teachers to extend her love of education even outside of her four classroom walls. She states,

And mostly just a lot of verbal praise. And they just love that. And, you know, I put my arm around their shoulders and I say, "Great job. I'm so proud of you," you know. But so, again, building that relationship with the child. Or when they're having a hard day, saying, "I see you're having a hard day," and "Let's talk about it," and taking them aside. It's really about building that relationship with them, again, and encouraging the kids. I love it.

One participant in this study taught full day kindergarten at Mandeville Elementary School located in the Panera School District. Among the four schools from this district, Mandeville has the second lowest percentage of non-white students and out of all the schools, Mandeville has roughly the median number of ELL students. Mandeville has the highest number of student FTE when compared to all other participating schools and is tied with Bales Elementary School at 85.5% in their free and reduced lunch rates, comparatively. Table 15 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Mandeville Elementary School.

Table 15

*Mandeville Elementary School Demographic Profile located in Tempura School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	620	
May 2015 Student Count	620	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	314	50.6%
<b>Female</b>	306	49.4%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	172	27.7%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	8	1.3%
Asian	38	6.1%
Black / African American	164	26.5%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	26	4.2%
White	130	21.0%
Two or More Races	82	13.2%

<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	530	85.5%
Special Education (May 2015)	69	11.1%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	109	17.6%
Migrant (May 2015)	0	0.0%
Section 504 (May 2015)	3	0.5%
Foster Care (May 2015)	n<10	

Mrs. Tennison used to teach at Mandeville Elementary School in the Tempura School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 53 years old and has been teaching for 30 years. Mrs. Tennison earned her Bachelor's degree at a state university and her Master's degree at a public university. Since the time of her first interview, Mrs. Tennison became an instructional coach in another school within the same school district.

Mrs. Tennison was happy to participate in this study. She brought her many years of experience to the table and thoughtfully shared examples of what has promoted success in her classroom. Mrs. Tennison discussed the importance of structure and dependability within the full day kindergarten classroom and the constructs that promote success for students of poverty. She shared details such as the importance of classroom set up, the organization of space, and the need for individual spaces as viable means to promote learning. Consistency and predictability are two other features Mrs. Tennison discussed as valuable and necessary in the full day classroom and particularly for students of poverty (see Appendix O).

So the physical classroom itself, those are the things I do, and just having it really set up, physically, easy access, and the kids know what to do and know what to expect. And then also having a, you know, consistent structure to the day, and making sure that they know what to expect, and if we're going to change anything up, I give them a warning about that.

Two of the participants in this study teach FDK at Stallworth Elementary School located in the Panera School District. Among the two schools from this district, Panera has a lower percentage of non-white students and lower numbers of ELL students. Stallworth has nearly half of the student FTE when compared to Farrell Elementary and there is only a 1 percentage point discrepancy in their free and reduced lunch rates, comparatively. Table 16 provides a complete representation of the demographics of Stallworth Elementary School.

Table 16

*Stallworth Elementary School Demographic Profile located in the Panera School District*

<b>Enrollment</b>		
October 2014 Student Count	314	
May 2015 Student Count	305	
<b>Gender (October 2014)</b>		
<b>Male</b>	173	55.1%
<b>Female</b>	141	44.9%
<b>Race/Ethnicity (October 2014)</b>		
Hispanic / Latino of any race(s)	64	20.4%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	1.0%
Asian	9	2.9%
Black / African American	12	3.8%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	2	0.6%
White	184	58.6%
Two or More Races	40	12.7%
<b>Special Programs</b>		
Free or Reduced-Price Meals (May 2015)	189	62.0%
Special Education (May 2015)	48	15.7%
Transitional Bilingual (May 2015)	16	5.2%
Migrant (May 2015)	1	0.3%
Section 504 (May 2015)	15	4.9%
Foster Care (May 2015)	n<10	

Ms. Menson teaches at Stallworth Elementary School in the Panera School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 28 years old and has been teaching for 5 years. Ms. Menson holds a Bachelor's degree and she is strongly considering getting her Master's Degree. She shared that she was originally inspired to teach because her mom was going to go into teaching, but she never finished school, just one semester shy. Ms. Menson talked about playing school with her siblings and how it was a dream for her to one day become a teacher. She spoke of these stories with genuine warmth and reflection.

Ms. Menson accepted the invitation to participate in this study with a sense of gratitude. She thoughtfully shared about her family and the longevity of experience involving teaching and how that influenced her decision to become a teacher. In addition to her mother and family, Ms. Menson shared the dramatic influence her own teachers had on her decision to become a teacher. When it comes to the classroom, Ms. Menson emphasized that each child brings something unique to the classroom and they are fully equipped with their own background, knowledge, and learning style. She emphasized the importance of getting to know the students in order to support them academically in a manner that works for them. As a result of these differences, Ms. Menson shared that it is important to meet a child where they are and to offer small group opportunities as well as teach in a variety of modalities to ensure success (see Appendix P).

They have to have some movement. So, um, so I try to incorporate movement, I incorporate singing, um, so that they're audible. Um, lots of visual stuff because I'm visual myself, so, um, just the more I can, like, express the same content in different ways so I can really understand that they get it, that's just kind of how I do that, if that makes sense.

Mrs. Clemons teaches at Stallworth Elementary School in the Panera School District as a full day kindergarten teacher. She is 36 years old and has been teaching for 9 years. Mrs. Clemons holds a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree. She spoke of the teaching profession as one of honor and influence. She discussed how her great granddad was a principal and teacher and her grandma was a teacher and she really wanted to follow in their footsteps. She fondly shared how in high school her desire to teach was evident. Mrs. Clemons went on to explain how she volunteered in a friend's classroom and was able to help a little girl through a math problem she struggled and when the little girl figured it out it was an amazing moment.

Mrs. Clemons was very enthusiastic about participating in this study and approached the interviews with sincerity and excitement. It is interesting to note that Mrs. Clemons is a WaKIDS (Washington Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills) trainer for the state of Washington and elements of that work trickled into her responses to the questions throughout both interviews. Mrs. Clemons emphasized the importance of understanding kids and where they are on the learning continuum in order to advance them appropriately to the next phase (see Appendix P). She also discussed the importance of connecting to families to engage the learning experience fully. Mrs. Clemons frequently referenced how knowing the students and their families was a true catalyst to advancing student achievement.

How do I know if students feel accepted? I try to make connections with all those kids; to give hugs to the ones that need hugs; high fives to the ones that just need high fives; going up to each child and telling them that, you know, they're important and they're special.

## Conclusion

Data collection was suspended as saturation was reached during the interview process. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013), share that data saturation is when no further data is needed to replicate findings. Achieving data saturation is crucial to the development of quality in qualitative research. Insufficient saturation can compromise the integrity and believability of findings. In qualitative research, determining that data saturation has been reached can be difficult to assess (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Unlike quantitative data which relies on numerical data to make conclusions, qualitative data utilizes various methods of data collection such as interviews and questionnaires. Designing data collection methods with purposeful design can help researchers to collect what is referred to as, “rich and thick data.” It is important that researchers balance the need for quality research and sample size (Fusch & Ness, 2015). As I was approaching the ninth participant it was clear to me that data saturation had been met. There was consistency with the responses and the ninth interview confirmed that notion. While the responses were very individual and unique and provided great insight and profound depth, they revealed a consistency in predictability and duplicability.

In Chapter IV the rich nature of individual one on one interviews served as a guide for investigating the perceptions of full day kindergarten teachers in relation to answering the research question in this study. The power and enrichment of this research study was in the nexus of two high quality interviews of teachers who met a set of specific criteria. The data sources for the research question were the findings from a well-coded coded spreadsheet and represented the findings from two sets of transcripts per individual participant.

The focus of Chapter IV was to summarize the findings of this paramount qualitative data collection focused on the following research question:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

The findings of this study reveal that full-day kindergarten teachers do not perceive the relationship between the teacher and the student to be the single most critical factor in augmenting student achievement. Rather, it is the influence with the least direct connection to building academic success for students of poverty. An outline of the themes is captured below in the order in which the Panera and Tempura School Districts perceive the greatest to the least influence over achievement.

1. The teacher’s ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.
2. Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
3. Student management as a means to elicit student success
4. The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement

In the following chapter, the researcher provides a detailed look at the implications of these findings.



## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

Poverty is an organic fiber that inflicts itself onto the soils of America and other nations around the world. Substantial research about the impact of poverty on student achievement and success have been conducted revealing findings that are alarming (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Barbarin & Aikens, 2015; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). The literature review in this study provided a greater understanding of the role of early intervention in a full-day Kindergarten (FDK) classroom, as well as teacher strategies that are deemed as effective practices. It examined the following five areas: (a) the growth mindset, (b) effective instructional strategies, (c) the impact of FDK, (d) formative assessment in the classroom, and finally, (e) the relationship between the teacher and the student. Comprehensive analysis of these five areas confirmed the critical role of the teacher-student relationship and its impact on achievement. Students who had positive teacher–student relationships were more likely to put forth more effort demonstrating stamina and resiliency within the learning environment. Schools that encourage teacher–student relationships and exert academic pressure to excel can encourage students to invest more effort to obtain academic achievement. Research has found that engagement with teachers can help students develop a sense of pride and motivation to succeed in their academic endeavors resulting in an overall increase in academic achievement (Lee, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

British child psychologist, John Bowlby (1988) avowed that attachment is a deep connectedness between human beings. This theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship developed

between a mother and child and emphasizes the profound implication for developing other future relationships. Bowlby (1982) shares that attachment behavior can be described as a behavior that results in a person attaining closeness to another individual who is perceived as more equipped to cope with the environment. Teacher-student relationships are one way in which students can develop necessary attachments with an authority figure from which they can model positive behaviors and begins the foundation for the theoretical framework of this study. It is this notion that serves as the theoretical framework for this study and this very concept that helped guide the research question for this study, which asks:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

Chapter 5 presents a comprehensive summary of the findings and discoveries made while interviewing nine FDK teachers who willingly participated in this study. The research question central to this study will be summarized and the chapter will include a synopsis of the findings. The role of teacher-student relationship will be featured in connection to the theoretical framework as presented by Bowlby (1998) who described the importance of the need for a child to develop a positive and meaningful relationship with a primary adult under the title of Attachment Theory.

### **Summary of the Results**

This study investigated the role of the teacher-student relationship and its influence on achievement among students of poverty. It is agreed that are many variables affecting student achievement or failure. However, the focus of this study was on the perceptions of the full-day kindergarten teacher around the concepts that influence achievement and therefore, qualitative research was the only sufficient methodology to explore the phenomenon fully and deeply.

Qualitative research can consist of interviews, observations, and review of documentation (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 1990). Research gathered from qualitative data can provide the ability to expand interdisciplinary knowledge and create greater impact documentation (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 1990). One form of qualitative research is that of Phenomenology. According to Creswell (2013), Phenomenological research seeks to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a certain situation or phenomenon. It strives to develop common meaning among several individuals while taking into consideration their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

By examining numerous viewpoints of the same condition, a researcher can begin to make some generalizations of what something is like as an experience from the 'insider's' perspective. A series of semi-structured, audio recorded, and transcribed interviews with full-day kindergarten teachers meeting a specific set of well-defined criteria took place to determine perceptions regarding the role of the relationship between the teacher and student and its impact on achievement among students of poverty. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) referred to structured interviews as a combination of observations and informal interviews. The researchers collect data from their observations and then are able to give data meaning through “guided conversations” (p. 315). Semi-structured interviews differ from structured interviews in that they are generally organized, structured, and held in designated locations. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that individual in-depth interviews would also be an appropriate method that could be used to gather qualitative data. That very methodology was utilized and the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for review, reflection, and analysis.

Through continued review of the transcripts, this researcher was prepared to deeply understand what the responses to the questions were revealing. The participants were incredibly

thoughtful, candid, and yet deliberate in their responses. As the coding continued, it was discovered that the nine emerging themes were exhibiting overlap as related to context, response, and categories. It was at this point that the process Creswell (2013) refers to as “winnowing” (p. 184) became very clear (see Appendix Q). The process to reduce the total number of emerging themes from nine somewhat isolated themes took place through increased “winnowing” (Creswell, p. 184), continued reflection and further analysis (see appendix Q). The reduction to a manageable number of four final themes was accomplished by identifying differences and similarities among the responses, reviewing the nine isolated emerging themes, and through eliminating and combining.

The identification of four major themes in this study were revealed with clarity and confidence. These themes capture the final results of this study and set the stage for digging deeply into the themes and implications for future educational impact and consideration. These themes were the results of 18 one-on-one, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with nine participants from two neighboring school districts. The themes are outlined below and listed in order of greatest to least in terms of frequency:

1. The teacher’s ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.
2. Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
3. Student management as a means to elicit student success.
4. The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement

The results from the Panera and Tempura School Districts combined revealed that the perception of the full-day kindergarten teachers placed the highest level of impact on the

teacher's use of instructional strategies such as differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practice with 320 responses equating to 32% of the overall responses. This was followed by 232 responses (24%) supporting the notion of the importance of the classroom atmosphere consisting of features such as cultivating trust and demonstrating flexibility. The next closest theme was the use of student management as a means to elicit academic success with 223 responses, or 23%. Finally, with 207 responses, the relationship between the teacher and student as a critical feature to advance student achievement was the theme with the lowest percentage at 21%. *Figure 6* provides a visual of the themes with the core representing the highest percentage and each outer layer moving away from the core representing a smaller percentage. The outer shell of the display represents the desired outcome of the attainment of increased student achievement.

Figure 6

*Themes from Panera and Tempura School Districts*



## Conclusion

The literature review in this study undeniably supports a strong correlation between poverty and poor achievement (Abelev, 2009; Addy & Wight, 2012; Hilferty et al., 2010; IES, 2014; Jackson, 2014; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Payne, 2005). Furthermore, the literature review unveiled specific strategies, or concepts, that positively impact student achievement:

- FDK can level the playing field and begin to close the achievement gap.
- A growth mindset, versus a fixed mindset, is important for a teacher to cultivate.
- Instructional strategies can positively impact student growth and achievement.
- Formative assessment plays an important role in closing the achievement.
- Healthy teacher–student relationships positively impact student achievement.

This research study considered the themes identified through the literature review as having a positive impact on achievement among students of poverty. The researcher pondered what the perceptions of FDK teachers might be around the role of the relationship and made a purposeful decision to focus on the phenomenon that a healthy teacher-student relationship has the potential for a profound impact in the area of positively impacting achievement. Further analysis occurred with the introduction of John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (Figure 5) as a means to justify, or provide rationale to, the need for the emphasis on the relationship and the final confirmation to pursue this phenomenological research. Information gleaned from individual interviews with teachers provided substantial inquiry-based, qualitative data related to this phenomenon.

The question examined in this phenomenological qualitative study was:

What are the perceptions of the teacher–student relationship among full-day Kindergarten teachers in relation to the achievement of students of poverty?

The revelation of the four themes were the results of 18 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with nine participants from two neighboring school districts. The themes demonstrate a strong correlation between the information discovered through the literature review (as noted above) and the actual perceptions of the FDK teachers interviewed for the purpose of this study. The themes are outlined below and listed in order of greatest to least in terms of frequency:

1. The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.
2. Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
3. Student management as a means to elicit student success.
4. The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement

There are many factors that impact student achievement and when they are all implemented the highest level of success is able to be recognized and attained. The themes represented by the participating FDK teachers characterize perceptions that support what research designates as having a positive influence on student achievement. The degree to which each theme was responded to, varies by small percentages as noted in Figure 7. When considering the gap that exists between the largest influence on student achievement (instructional strategies) and the smallest (relationship) as perceived by the participating FDK teachers, the percentage is defined as an 11% gap. Yet the average gap between all four themes is 2.75%. This supports the belief that all themes represent an important opportunity for impacting student achievement among students of poverty, according to the perceptions of FDK participating teachers.

Figure 7

*Demonstration of Percentage Differences Among the Themes***Theme One: Strategies**

In its entirety the first theme is presented as: *The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.*

Teacher strategies, or teacher behaviors, that are implemented at a certain level of fidelity demonstrate an increase in achievement at various levels in the school setting (Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010; Griffith et al., 2011; Jensen, 2008). This is important to note, as these strategies may begin to empower teachers and districts with a specific platform to effectively close the achievement gap.

A subsequent high impact strategy as revealed by the literature review is that of the positive impact of instructional strategies (Allington, 1991; Jensen, 2008; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Nye et al., 2004; Stronge et al., 2011). Allington (2006) shared that specific instructional strategies utilized by the teacher produce high results for closing the achievement gap and some produce greater results than others. Research has indicated that teacher strategies augment achievement, yet there seems to be a need for further study to identify the specific strategies. Jensen (2008) pointed out general strategies, yet specificity could act as a catalyst toward further student success. Participant Mr. Vincent supported this theme when he shared:

So what -- and so it becomes very easy then to, um, to combine things because, like, we, uh -- throughout the year we'll talk about, um, you know, how flowers grow, and seeds,



and you need sun, you need soil, you need air. You need all these things for the seeds to grow. And then by the spring we're going to do it. We're going to take a seed. We're going to use those things that we learned about, and we're going to actually make a bean seed grow, and we're all going to have our own....So I try to make everything that I -- that I create on my own kind of spin off from those things that we're learning about in school, and tying them together as much as possible. And, yeah, if I can -- if I can write a story, or if I can, you know, work in the, uh, the Skylanders or, uh -- or Anna and Elsa, then that's great; then they're that much more focused.

Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges (2004) reported that a 4-year trial in which students and teachers were assigned randomly to classes to approximate teacher effects on student achievement revealed noteworthy information. Teacher properties were appraised within the same school and between teacher variance modules of accomplishment status and mounting achievement gains to determine which teacher strategies were most notable for helping students achieve. A large gain was noted by teachers utilizing specific strategies. The gains of second- and third-grade students were substantial, especially with low-income students (Nye et al., 2004). Jensen (2008) verifies that some of those strategies are to segment instruction, utilize error correction, frequently adjust, nurture and guide meaning, use creative repetition, teach students how to guesstimate and predict. Mrs. Clemons, a participant from the Panera School District, emphasized this very same concept when she stated:

... to really focus on every child, and we spend a lot of time it ends up sometimes hitting those middle kids and those lower kids but, really, it's every single kid. So we have kids who come in who are readers, and how do I move that kid to the next step? I have kids that come in knowing no letters and no sounds, and how do I get them to that next step?

So it's really looking at every single child and, um and meeting each of their needs and looking forward, and setting goals for all those kids to help them achieve, you know, every single child be successful.

Mrs. Clemons makes a clear case for the need to differentiate and this is in strong alignment with best practices that positively influence achievement. It is a single call for pause, as this emphasizes a critical element necessary for K-12 education and even more specifically, as a direct connection to this study, a critical component for FDK. It is absolutely essential, as demonstrated in Chapter II, for teachers to be willing to differentiate and provide personalized instruction as a means to advance academic achievement. The additional layer through personalized instruction is to bring in the student interest topics, as they begin to act as a first step, or pre-cursor toward building that critical relationship between the teacher and the student.

### **Theme Two: Atmosphere**

In it's entirety, the second theme is presented as: *Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement is viewed by kindergarten teachers in this study to influence student achievement.*

Li-Grining et al. (2010) reviewed the findings of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Cohort) using individual growth modeling. The researchers were looking for a correlation between early ATL and academic achievement in elementary school. ATL refers to a child's persistence, regulation of emotions, diligence, flexibility, and organization (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Developmental theorists believe that children who have a cumulative advantage during the early learning phases continue to accrue advantages as their education continues (Li-Grining et al., 2010). Children with early ATL have the ability to self-regulate and persevere, thereby allowing them to focus and cooperate during learning time (Li-Grining et al., 2010).

Understanding the positive correlation between early ATL and academic achievement can help educators to develop preventative measures to ensure that all students are given equal opportunity to succeed (Li-Grining et al., 2010).

Guo and Harris (2000) highlighted the influence of poverty on cognitive development and emotional well-being. The authors stated,

Childhood poverty is correlated with dropping out of school, low academic achievement, teenage pregnancy, and childbearing, poor mental and physical health, delinquent behavior, and unemployment in adolescence and early adulthood. The longer children live in poverty, the lower their educational achievement and the worse their social and emotional functioning (p. 431).

Guo and Harris (2000) examined how indirect factors, such as physical environment, intellectual stimulus in the home, access to health care, parenting approach, and outreach to quality child care can mediate the disadvantages experienced by impoverished children. Mrs. Fredrick, a FDK participant from the Tempura School District provided great insight into theme two when she shared:

...children that come from chaotic backgrounds, if they know they can come to a place where they're loved -- which I hope I show them every day that they're worthwhile, they're capable, they're competent, they have a structure, it's a safe learning environment - - they know what to expect and they know what to do, I think that breeds success right there.

The environment has an exponential focus on the role of the teacher as expanding resilience, perseverance, and the safety net provided for students to take risks and enjoy the freedom to make mistakes (Griffith et al., 2011; Jensen, 2008). Dweck (2006) also shared how the business

world, parents, community, and schools have the ability to influence self-view through a mindset. Dweck (2006) described a fixed mindset as containing a lack of flexibility and a growth mindset as controlling personal learning and decision making. The individual with a growth mindset believes that hard work and perseverance help with individual growth and development (Dweck, 2006). This theme obtained strong evidence supporting this notion, especially when Mrs. Tennison shared:

So the physical classroom itself, those are the things I do, and just having it really set up, um, physically, easy access, and the kids know what to do and know what to expect. And then also having a, you know, consistent structure to the day, and making sure that they know what to expect, and if we're going to change anything up, I give them a warning about that. And I always do the thing where I'm telling them about how much time they have for something, and then giving them an opportunity to let them know that in you know, you have two more minutes left and then we have to transition. And within that, having signals for them so they know it's coming.

### **Theme Three: Student Management**

In it's entirety, the third theme is presented as: *Student management as a means to elicit student success.*

Numerous obstacles, such as varying student needs and capabilities, emphasis on high-stakes testing, and standards-based curriculum, can create difficulties for both students and teachers. Duchaine et al. (2011) sought to understand the role of providing teachers and students with immediate and relative positive feedback in an effort to increase student participation and engagement and produce teacher effectiveness. Participation in the academic setting is critical for academic success, and positive feedback can provide teachers the opportunity to avoid

responding incorrectly and reinforcing negative behaviors (Duchaine et al., 2011). One form of positive feedback to students referred to was behavior-specific praise statements (BSPS). This is a teaching strategy teachers can use in their classrooms to give students positive feedback in the form of praise for desired behaviors. Duchaine et al. (2011) shared how BSPS involves the teacher identifying and expressing approval for desired behaviors. Positive feedback should be immediate, continual, and relevant. Findings indicated that the use of BSPS increases positive behaviors and increased engagement among students. Along with the use of BSPS to encourage student engagement, it was suggested that teachers also receive feedback on their effectiveness to deliver BSPS to students. This can be done through professional observation and mentoring that encourages teachers to be effective through self-reflection (Duchaine et al., 2011).

With an increase in maladaptive and violent behaviors among students within the school setting, Pigford (2001) sought to understand the influence of implementing appropriate classroom management strategies. Pigford (2001) also explored the importance of developing positive teacher–student relationships that encourage academic success. Teachers should incorporate student–relationship development into the curriculum to promote a positive and successful learning environment (Pigford, 2001; Spilt et al., 2012). Development of strategies to strengthen teacher–student trust can provide teachers the tools to form crucial connections to students. Pigford (2001) noted that teacher strategies to develop relationships could include providing positive feedback, reducing negative comments, and showing invested interest in the lives of students. Teachers can also make connections with students by cultivating mutual interests such as sports or other activities. This was reinforced when Ms. Blandon from the Tempura School District shared:

And students know if I'm organized and I'm ready to teach them, then they need to be organized and ready to learn. And they know when we do direct instruction, what the expectations are, and when they can talk, and when they can have fun, and when they can kind of let go and be kindergarteners.

Mrs. Tennison shared a story of using behavior management in a differentiated manner to support the success of an individual. The management theme consisted of feedback indicating support of the whole group, small groups as well as individual students. Mrs. Tennison from Tempura shared a story about helping an individual student be successful through the use of effective management strategies:

I would just give him random points when I would catch him, you know, being respectful, responsible, safe kind of stuff, and every time he got five. Those weren't points. They were just, like, stars on this little chart. And he was really into cars, so he would get to take....them to the assistant principal. Every time he got five stars. So we would do it as soon as possible. And when he got his five stars...I would just give him this little thing. He was really super quiet. He would go get his bag of little cars. He would take them down to the office and he would get to play.

#### **Theme Four: Relationship**

In its entirety, the fourth theme is presented in its entirety as: *The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.*

According to Silva et al. (2011), children of poverty are more likely to be disengaged within the classroom in comparison to their advantaged peers. Disengagement in school can be used to predict poor future student academic outcomes. Silva et al. (2011) examined the

influence of both emotional school engagement, which denotes a student's capacity to form connections and relationships within their schools, and student's effortful control, or attitudes about school, on the student's ability to academically achieve. Developing early positive attitudes surrounding school along with the development of teacher–student relationships can influence a child's academic success. Effortful control utilized by students can encourage students to positively engage with learning and others (Silva et al., 2011).

Lee (2012) shares that students across the world have steadily been experiencing disengagement from their schools. Research has shown that students often feel a lowered sense of belongingness that can result in decreased academic participation. Students who are not involved in their educational experience are at increased risk for displaying maladaptive behaviors, experiencing academic failure, and even choosing to drop out of school altogether. Lee (2012) found that students who had positive teacher–student relationships were more likely to put forth more effort demonstrating stamina and resiliency within the learning environment. Schools that encourage teacher–student relationships and exert academic pressure to excel can encourage students to invest more effort to obtain academic achievement. Research has found that engagement with teachers can help students develop a sense of pride and motivation to succeed in their academic endeavors (Lee, 2012).

According to Spilt et al. (2012), positive teacher–student relationships are thought to increase student academic achievement by encouraging children to engage in their education. Research has consequently demonstrated that negative relationships are a greater predictor of maladaptive behaviors, which can lead to delayed academic development and the inability to academically succeed (Spilt et al., 2012). The hope is that positive teacher–student relationships combat these risk factors to support academic achievement. Teacher–student relationships offer

students the ability to increase student belongingness and provide motivation and goal setting, which increase student academic ability. Spilt et al. (2012) found a relationship between increased conflict and delayed academic growth. Boys, children of African American descent, and children of poverty were found to have an increased risk for continued conflict, leading to a decrease in academic achievement. Researchers have found as children grow older, warmth in teacher–student relationships decreased (Spilt et al., 2012). This reduction in warmth may be attributed to less emphasis on meeting children’s socio-emotional needs and a continued increase in academic expectations. The study implicates that warm teacher–student relationships can provide children support, security, and confidence that encourages academic achievement (Spilt et al., 2012).

Wu et al. (2010) utilized self-reports from teachers and students to examine the influence of teacher–student relationships on academic success. Research shows that teacher–student relationships consisting of heightened levels of agency and decreased instances of conflict produce signs of academic achievement upon formal assessment. Affirmative teacher–student relationships can encourage a sense of inclusion, engagement, and an increase in desired behaviors in students (Spilt et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2010). Wu et al. (2010) measured teacher–student relationship quality (TSRQ) from a large, diverse sample of teachers and students using self-report techniques. From this sample, four clusters were revealed: congruent positive (high agency, decreased conflict), congruent negative (low agency, increased conflict), incongruent child negative (positive to average TSRQ, decrease in warmth), and incongruent child positive (poor peer–teacher reports of TSRQ, average reports from child). Results of the study indicated a strong influence between TSRQ and positive academic outcomes (Wu et al., 2010).



In the 1992 study entitled *Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children Birth to Adulthood*, Werner and Smith (1992) stated, “A caring relationship with a caring adult enables at-risk youth to make life-altering changes” (p. 34). It is essential to give a certain amount of freedom to students in developing this relationship (Fisher et al., 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). Mrs. Kronk captured the concept of cultivating relationships beautifully when she shared of examples of how she does that in her FDK classroom:

And making the classroom successful for all children, again, is finding out their interests, and how they learn and, um and looking at, you know, where they might have a deficit and how can you fill that, um, that, that need in their life, or in their academics, to help them be successful, and just always looking for new ideas, new strategies, new interventions to use with them so every child can be successful; talking with the parents about what works for them and how to motivate them and, um, so that's kind of what I look at as far as helping them be successful in the classroom, making them feel a part of our room, um, we just cover the walls with photos, and making every child feel valuable and, um, appreciated, and in letting every child have an opportunity to participate in conversations and, um...because you always have some who talk a little bit more than others, but making sure that you're, you create that environment that's very equitable for everybody to participate and be successful in your room, I think.

## **Conclusion**

The perceptions of the participants in this study support the notion the relationship between the teacher and the student plays an important role in the academic achievement among students of poverty, as evidenced by the responses noted through the coding of the transcripts (see Appendix Q) as well as the rich quotations gathered. While the theme connected to

relationships received the fewest responses, the four themes did not vary dramatically between percentage points (see Figure 7) and it is clear FDK teachers view the relationship as an important and required feature to augment achievement for students of poverty.

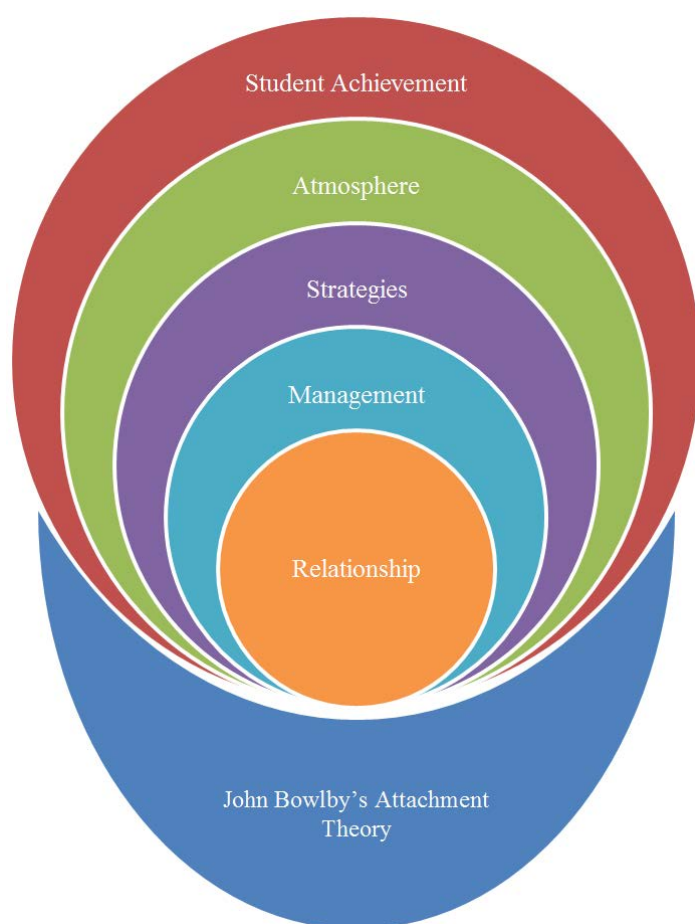
When taking a moment to consider the power available through the theoretical framework utilized for this study under John Bowlby's work (see Figure 5), there is strong evidence supporting the requirement for secure relationships as a paramount need for our young learners. Bowlby (1982) posed that child development centered on the child's ability to form a secure relationship with their mother or immediate caregiver. This crucial bond is thought to provide the child with a secure base which fosters increased learning and growth (Bowlby, 1982). Children who do not form a secure attachment may experience adverse developmental delays and difficulty forming positive, meaningful relationships. The notion is to seamlessly go from the mother (or other care provider) to the classroom teacher in the FDK class and for the relationship to be strong and supportive. This study revealed findings in visible correlation to this very theory. The collective responses among the FDK teachers reveal the fact that the relationship between a teacher and the student is an important agent toward advancing student achievement.

Understanding the results of this study and the critical function the role of the relationships plays in the perceptions of FDK teachers, make it easy to consider what might happen if the relationship became the priority in the FDK classroom and other strategies acted as a support to the development of the relationship. Figure 8 illustrates the theoretical framework as a base that acts as a cradle to gently support the notion that the relationship is the core, or the nucleus to the importance of advancing student achievement. The cradle of the framework supports a seamless transition from the relationship of the primary caregiver to that of the

classroom teacher. The other variables, such as management, strategies and atmosphere, make up the composition of the other important features used to augment achievement in the FDK classroom. It is fair to say that those other strategies may ebb and flow and move into different layers beyond the nucleus labeled as the relationship to impact achievement. The outer objective would continually remain the same and be known as the ultimate goal to positively impact student achievement.

Figure 8

*Representation of an Ideal Emphasis*



While this study focused on the importance of the teacher-student relationship for impacting student achievement among students of poverty, it is fair to make the assumption that

this focus would advance the learning of all students despite their background or academic deficits. Just as the relationship component acts as a catalyst toward advancing achievement for students of poverty, the generalization could be made that all students regardless of their background would benefit strongly from a positive student-teacher relationship. This discovery is herculean for K-12 education. This study confirms that the perceptions of FDK teachers are such that the relationship does matter and it is influential, yet it is not the most prominent theme. Let us hypothetically shift the prominence to that of the first and foremost theme (which would only require an 11% shift), apply the notion across the grade levels and to all students regardless of their backgrounds, and we will likely see advancements outpacing that which is current. Again, the potential this concept has for teachers guiding learners and for the learners themselves is profound and deeply meaningful.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

It is important to continue to study the perceptions of FDK teachers with a focus on beliefs around practices that promote success in the classroom. Although there is research gathered around the influence of parent involvement, a specific study around the involvement in a FDK setting would be beneficial in the future. Parent and family involvement was discussed by the participants many times as a means to provide support or advance student achievement. It became clear that using this premise as a future study could be very beneficial while also focusing on the relationship and other strategies emphasized in this study. Then to take it one step further, and as a means to support best practices in K-12 education, research around the discovery as to whether or not specific common practices in the area of family/parent involvement that correlate to higher achievement in the FDK setting could be a strong advantage. Mrs. Kronk said it best when she shared,

But I think one of the key components is building a solid relationship with the families. I would say, I say "friendships" because I really strive, um, to form friendships with my families. I love it at the end of the year when they're like, "oh, I really feel like you're one of my best friends," you know, so that's what I strive for, is creating, what I strive for is creating those kind of relationships not only with the parents, but the families, all of the family members because I kind of look at it like teaching is almost to me like co-parenting and, um, and just being with that important person in that child's life.

Participants in this study were from two different districts within the same county and within the same state. They represented five different schools and a large chronological age span. Further research in this area may need to ensure greater homogeneity of the research sample. Narrowing the types of participants, the years of experience, or even age categories may better illuminate the perceptions around the role of the relationship and its impact on student achievement among students of poverty. Ultimately, the potential recommendations for practice could be very specific to a group of teachers within a more specific set of criteria.

Further studies could investigate perceptions of first grade teachers around the role of the relationship and take it even further up the grade levels. As the author of this study was conducting interviews, she could not help but wonder if perceptions would look similar across the grade levels. Passion for the job and the students was so clear among the participants. It would be helpful and of interest to identify if the same level of passion, care and relationship emphasis took place as we moved through the grade levels. It would be of interest to identify if there was a noticeable grade level in which teachers placed the value of advancing student achievement through relationships took a strong shift.

## **Implications for Professional Practice**

Welsh et al. (2010) found that children of poverty can experience a delay in readiness for kindergarten in comparison to their advantaged peers. It is hoped that preschool programs created by legislation, such as the Head Start program, can assist teachers and students in narrowing the achievement gap for children of poverty and prepare them for entering formal school in kindergarten (Bagdi & Vacca 2005; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Grisham-Brown et al., 2006). While Head Start and other programs are designed to change the starting line, the reality is that not all families have access to these programs. Kindergarten is the first public school opportunity that families fully understand and access. Parents typically send their very best student to school with a hopeful heart and a vision of a bright and productive future. This is the setting where children come to school and start their educational career and in many ways it shapes their future as well as their outlook on learning, life, social-emotional behaviors, and ultimately, their approach to learning. This is the time when dreams begin and the educational system has a unique and profound opportunity to shape the direction of that dream.

The results of this study will be helpful to school districts with noteworthy poverty thresholds demonstrating a need to provide a service delivery model that considers professional practices that get to the core of advancement at the highest rate. This study will be helpful for those very districts, schools, and the teachers inside of those schools to understand the power of the relationship and the hierarchy of the importance according to the perceptions of FDK teachers. Knowledge provides power and power provides an opportunity for change and growth. Therefore, this knowledge could be very useful to those districts, those schools, those teachers. Particularly noteworthy, is that the results of this study emphasize the power of one. That one is the classroom teacher and the intense influence that person has over the healthy growth of an

individual simply through cultivating a positive relationship. This study allows for an individual teacher to cause a shift in thinking and that shift can happen without a strategic plan or lesson plan. It can happen with the immediate prioritization of the relationship. It can happen with the power of one.

Any higher education institutions that grant teaching certificates would benefit greatly from this study. Upon review of the course requirements for teacher certification in the state in which this study took place, most programs emphasize content area study, but do not require cultural courses that get to the nucleus of the power of the relationship between the teacher and the student. Better understanding the fact that research strongly supports the need for a relationship to be developed and the fact that teachers perceive it to be valuable, but not at the highest level, reinforces a need for the topic to be included in teacher preparation programs.

This study certainly provides a documented need for continued professional development at the district level focusing on the value or importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student. This would be beneficial and likely positively impact the academic trajectory for students. District level professional development would emphasize a direction, or movement, that the entire district values and supports. Understanding educational trends that may be considered hot topics often get the focus at the district level is important, yet this study verifies that sometimes things we think are basic still require emphasis.

Moving beyond the district level to the school level for professional development provides a more finite and personalized opportunity to build success among the teachers doing the work on the front lines and can be targeted to the school level needs and cultural mores. Miles, Odden, Fermanich & Archibald (2004) point out that professional development is most effective when it is job imbedded and provides practitioners with an opportunity to practice the

learning. When learning is part of the school day, educators are involved in growth rather than learning being limited to those who volunteer to participate on their own accord. Taking it a step further, job-imbedded professional development helps teachers analyze student data during the school year to immediately detect learning problems, identify solutions, and immediately implement the solutions to address the needs of students (Miles et al., 2004). Schools could augment success with their teacher base through the personalized coaching of those teachers who have demonstrated understanding of the power of the relationship. Explicit modeling of ways to cultivate and nurture the relationship could be useful and beneficial for others who have not made that clear connection.

This study confirms the power of one. The power that one individual teacher has on the advancement of student achievement among students of poverty. The implications are huge. It is imperative for our teachers who are guiding the future to realize this potential and give themselves permission to focus on the relationship. In the event that professional development is not available, the individual teacher can provide influence over this very concept simply by emphasizing the relationship.



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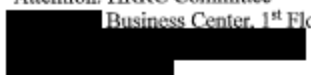




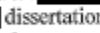




## Appendix A

NIH Certificate



## Appendix B

Permission from Panera

	  SCHOOL DISTRICT	<i>A Tradition of Excellence</i> <hr/>  <i>Ed.D., Superintendent</i>
<p>January 15, 2015</p>		
<p> University          Attention: HRRC Committee            Business Center, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor</p>		
<p>Re: Research Authorization for </p>		
<p>Dear HRRC Committee,</p>		
<p> has been granted permission to conduct dissertation research in the  School District. Administration of the  School District has reviewed Mrs.  dissertation proposal, <i>Perceptions of the student-teacher relationship among full day kindergarten teachers in relation to achievement of students of poverty.</i></p>		
<p>This site authorization is offered with the following stipulations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research is to be conducted between July 2015 and January 2016.</li> <li>• Participation by  School District employees in the research study is voluntary.</li> <li>• The school district will receive a copy of the research study results and/or dissertation.</li> </ul>		
<p>I support this effort and will provide assistance for the successful research implementation of the proposed student. If you have any questions, please contact me at .</p>		
<p>Sincerely,</p> <p></p>		
<p>Dr.           Executive Director of Assessment, Accountability and Student Success</p>		

## Appendix C

Permission from Tempura

[REDACTED]  
Research and Evaluation  
[REDACTED], Director  
[REDACTED]  
work: [REDACTED] - cell: [REDACTED]

January 20, 2015

[REDACTED] University  
Attention: HRRC Committee  
[REDACTED]

Re: Research Proposal Site Access for [REDACTED]

Dear HRRC Members:

This letter is to inform the HRCC that Administration at [REDACTED] School District has reviewed the proposed dissertation research plan including subjects, intervention, assessment procedures, proposed data collection procedures, data analysis, and purpose of the study around The Perceptions of the Role of the relationship between the teacher and the student in a Full Day Kindergarten setting. Mrs. [REDACTED] has permission to conduct her research with administrators and teachers at elementary schools in the [REDACTED] School District. The authorization dates for this research study are August 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
Director of Research and Evaluation

Cc: [REDACTED]

## Appendix D

Electronic Notice

Greetings!

My name is [REDACTED] and I am a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University, studying the perceptions of full-day kindergarten teachers regarding the role of the teacher–student relationship and its impact on student achievement among students of poverty. You are receiving this survey because you currently teach kindergarten in a Title I school in the [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] School District.

I am looking for a sample of full-day kindergarten teachers to participate in an interview with me in late summer or fall. The questions will focus on ways you help students feel successful in your classroom. Each interview will be approximately 45–60 minutes.

I believe that your responses will provide valuable information for policy makers, school administrators, and others in the field of early learning education as we endeavor to better understand how to help students be successful. Thanks for considering your part in my study.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me. [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

## Appendix E

### Over 18 Informed Consent Form

#### A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

██████████, PhD candidate, in the Department of Graduate Education at ██████████ University is conducting a research study related to full-day kindergarten teacher perceptions of the role of the teacher–student relationship among students of poverty.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a healthy volunteer, over the age of 18.

#### B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form, volunteering to participate in the study.
2. You will answer a set of interview questions and engage in a discussion on the role of the teacher–student relationship. This discussion will be audio taped and is expected to last approximately 60 minutes.
3. You will answer a set of demographic questions on standard paper and pencil. It should take approximately 5 minutes to answer these questions.
4. You will be asked to read a debriefing statement at the conclusion of the interview.
5. You will be asked to reply to an e-mail at the conclusion of the study asking you to confirm the data that was gathered during the research process.

These procedures will be completed at a location mutually decided upon by the participant and principal investigator and will take a total time of about 60 minutes.

#### C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. Although unforeseen, it is possible that one or more of the interview questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. For this research project, the researcher is requesting demographic information. Due to the make-up of Washington’s population, the combined answers to these questions will likely ensure that the person is not identifiable. The researchers will make every effort to protect your confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions, you may leave them blank.



3. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data from notes, audio tapes, and disks will be kept in a secure location. In compliance with the Federal wide Assurance Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).

#### **D. BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may help educators to understand the perceptions of full-day kindergarten teachers in an area that research strongly suggests will assist in closing the achievement gap among students of poverty.

#### **E. PAYMENTS**

There are no payments for participating in this study.

#### **F. QUESTIONS**

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the investigator. [REDACTED] can be contacted via e-mail at [REDACTED] via telephone at [REDACTED] (C).

Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

#### **G. CONSENT**

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student at [REDACTED] University.

*I give my consent to participate in this study:*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Study Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:*

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Study Participant**

**Date**

*I do not give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:*

---

**Signature of Study Participant**

---

**Date**

*I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study:*

---

**Signature of Study Participant**

---

**Date**

---

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent**

---

**Date**

*I do not give my consent to participate in this study:*

---

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent**

---

**Date**

**THE [REDACTED] [REDACTED] UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW COMMITTEE  
HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN  
PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH**

## Appendix F

### Verbatim Instructions for the Interview

Hi \_\_\_\_\_!

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I appreciate it greatly.

#### **Semi-structured, Audio-Recorded Interviews**

One semi-structured, audio-recorded interview will be conducted with each participant. These procedures will be completed at the school site or a public location mutually decided upon by the participant and the investigator and will take a total time of about 45- 60 minutes.

This process is completely voluntary and you can select to suspend your involvement at any time. You can select to answer questions that are of comfort to you and are not obligated to answer all of the questions.

Do you have any questions or can I clarify anything?

Thank you for your participation.

## Appendix G

### Interview Questions

Please say your name.

How long have you been teaching?

What is your age?

What school do you teach at?

What made you decide to be a teacher?

Tell me how you make the classroom successful for all children.

Tell me about your behavior management plan and procedures?

What motivates students in your class?

Do you include student interest topics in your lessons? Why or why not? (prompt/elaborate)

Would your students describe you as someone who is interested in them?

How do you know if students feel accepted by you?

What are the three most important things you can do to help students meet success?

## Appendix H

### Participant Debrief

Greetings \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study. I appreciate you taking the time to respond to the interview questions I asked.

After I have an opportunity to analyze the data, I will e-mail you the results of your specific interview and ask for feedback. Mainly, I want to ensure that I captured the essence of our discussion, accurately portraying our discussion and your thoughts.

#### **Questions**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, \_\_\_\_\_ can be contacted via e-mail at \_\_\_\_\_, via telephone at \_\_\_\_\_, or by writing: \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your participation!

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Doctoral Student

\_\_\_\_\_ University

**Appendix I**  
**Sharing of Themes**

March 20, 2016

Dear---

Thank you for your participation in the study this past semester. I wanted to let you know the final themes that resulted from the interviews of all participants (see below).

If you have any questions or suggestions, please let me know.

**Themes:**

1. Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
2. The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.
3. Student management as a means to elicit student success.
4. The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement

Thank you again for your help and support of this work.

Lisa Nolan  
Doctoral Candidate  
Northwest Nazarene University

253.583.6016

## Appendix J

### Confidentiality Agreement

**Title of Research Project:** Full day kindergarten teacher perceptions of the role of the relationship between the teacher and the student among students of poverty.

**Local Principal Investigator:**

As an assistant to the research team I understand that I may have access to confidential information about study sites and participants. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

- I understand that names and any other identifying information about study sites and participants are completely confidential.
- I agree not to divulge, publish, or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the course of this research project that could identify the persons who participated in the study.
- I understand that all information about study sites or participants obtained or accessed by me in the course of my work is confidential. I agree not to divulge or otherwise make known to unauthorized persons any of this information, unless specifically authorized to do so by approved protocol or by the local principal investigator acting in response to applicable law or court order, or public health or clinical need.
- I understand that I am not to read information about study sites or participants, or any other confidential documents, nor ask questions of study participants for my own personal information but only to the extent and for the purpose of performing my assigned duties on this research project.
- I agree to notify the local principal investigator immediately should I become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on my part or on the part of another person.

---

Signature

---

Date

---

Printed Name

---

Signature of Principal Investigator

---

Date

---

Printed Name

## Appendix K

### Permission to Use Graphic

Oct 13 (1 day ago) ☆ ↶ ▾


to [REDACTED], [REDACTED] me ▾

Dear Ms. [REDACTED],

I'm glad that you found the article useful for your studies. It was an interesting study to conduct and, I hope, continues to be informative for our profession.

On behalf of my colleagues and myself, I can offer our agreement for you to use the identified figure in your dissertation. However, I am fairly certain that the Journal of Teacher Education actually owns the copyright to the figure. Thus, to be certain that you have clearance, I suggest that you contact JTE directly to request permission.


Let me wish for you best wishes with your study.



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**Author:** [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

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## Appendix L

### Permission to Use Graphic

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Best regards,

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## Appendix M

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## Appendix N

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Dear Mrs. [REDACTED],

Corwin Press requires additional information regarding your request.

**Latest Comment:** You may use the material in your dissertation as long as you credit the original source. You do not need a license/agreement for this type of use. If you wish to republish the material in a published work...

**To review and respond to Corwin Press questions/comments, please click the link below to open RightsLink.**

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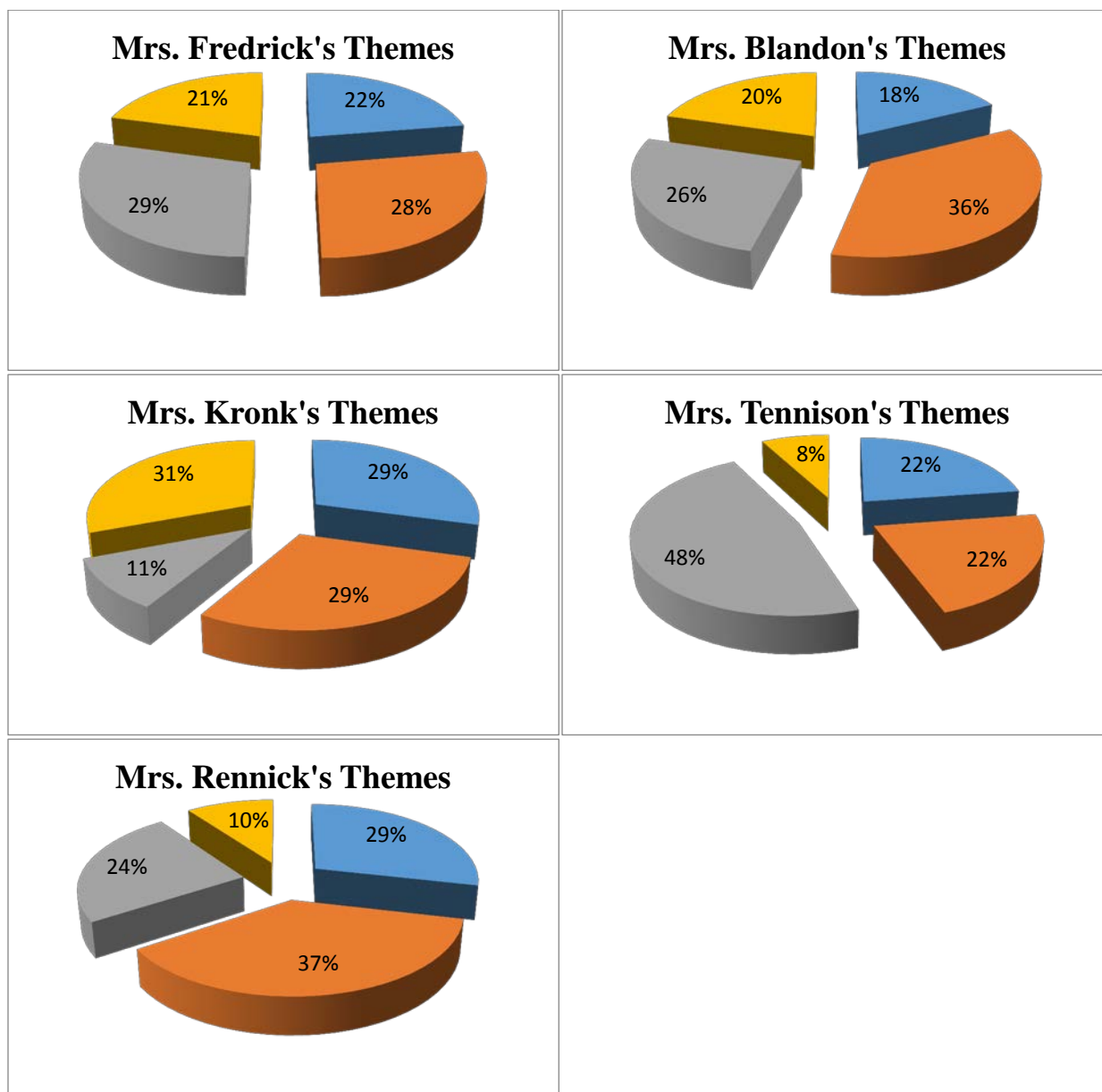
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## Appendix O

## Participant Results Tempura School District

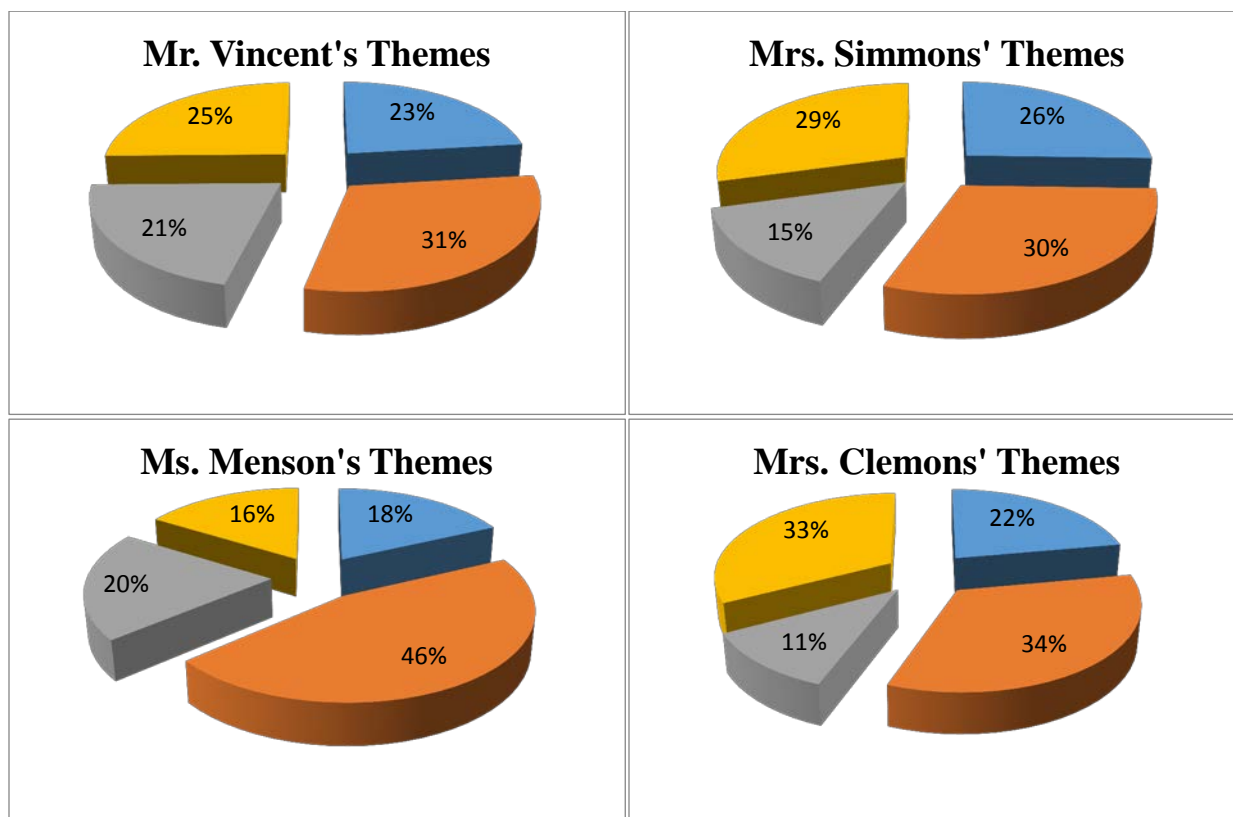


**Legend**

-  Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.
-  The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.
-  Student management as a means to elicit student success.
-  The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.

## Appendix P

### Participant Results Panera School District



#### Legend

■ Promoting a classroom atmosphere focused on cultivating trust, care, and demonstrating flexibility plays a role in achievement.

■ The teacher's ability to make an academic difference manifesting through instructional strategies including: differentiation, student interest topics and instructional practices.

■ Student management as a means to elicit student success.

■ The relationship between the teacher and the student viewed as a critical component to positively influence student achievement.

## Appendix Q

## Sample of Winnowing

51 sometimes, you know, they'll talk about, like, what an important  
 52 person you were in their life, too, so that's really rewarding.  
 53 Um, and I -- you know, college was really great. I started off in  
 54 Early Childhood Ed at Pierce College, went there and loved that;  
 55 court work, too. And that, again, kind of just reaffirmed, I'm in the  
 56 right field here. I really like that, kind of just corroborating with  
 57 other people and things, so...  
 58 IN: Okay. Thank you.  
 59 Tell me how you make the classroom successful for all children.  
 60 LK: Well, I think one of the first things I do to help make the  
 61 classroom successful for all children is, um, first of all, is  
 62 connecting with the family, um, and finding out a little bit about the  
 63 family background, the family dynamics. Just knowing, and really  
 64 not, kind of, surface level, but digging a little deeper to know each  
 65 child, like what their interests are and what motivates them, what  
 66 makes them sad, what makes them feel happy, um, how they  
 67 express themselves, but just -- just reaching out and finding out,  
 68 in depth, all that information about them.  
 69 But I think one of the key components is building a solid  
 70 relationship with the families. I would say -- I say "friendships"  
 71 because I really strive, um, to form friendships with my families. I  
 72 love it at the end of the year when they're like, "oh, I really feel like  
 73 your one of my best friends," you know, so that's what I strive for, is  
 74 creating -- what I strive for is creating those kind of relationships  
 75 not only with the parents, but the families, all of the family

student  
interest  
move to  
atmosphere

11 — impact  
 (emotional relationship)

relationship

10.11.15  
11.23.15