"You have to have a relationship first":

Student-teacher relationships as a focus of school reform

by

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— JGT
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Abstract

While conducting fieldwork in two "alternative" high schools, I was struck by how consistently the educators I interviewed invoked "relationships" with young people as the key to engaging them in school. Their emphasis on the primacy of student-teacher relationships echoes across a varied body of academic research literature. This dissertation synthesizes an instructive sample of that literature into a symposium, or philosophical conversation, exploring the many meanings, ramifications, and empirical bases of the idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships as a focus of school reform. The conversation unfolds in three parts. Chapter 1 specifies five different assertions about why and how student-teacher relationships matter, drawing on a range of perspectives including (among others) Attachment Theory, social-constructivist theories of learning, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Self-Determination Theory, Carl Rogers's theory of "learner-centered" education, and Nel Noddings's ethic of caring. Although different ways of framing the value of student-teacher relationships are not necessarily mutually exclusive, disentangling them helps us critically examine the distinctive premises, problems, and possibilities that each one brings to the fore. Chapter 2 considers three families of strategies for fostering better student-teacher relationships through changes to the institutional environment. In particular, I discuss strategies for building protected time for relationship-building into the school schedule, for designing accountability structures that rely less on standardization, and for creating university-based teacher education programs that embody an ethos of care. Chapter 3 offers close readings of leading examples of empirical studies related to student-teacher relationships, representing diverse methodological approaches including experimental design, statistical modeling, meta-analysis, case study, and narrative. Drawing especially on the work of Bent Flyvbjerg, I suggest that the "usefulness" of research lies not only in the validity of the findings it reports or the theory it generates, but in the opportunity it affords readers to develop their own impressions, explanations, and plans as they engage with the text. This dissertation is itself an attempt at scholarship that aims to stimulate active questioning and

personal reflection. Thus, it ends not with any "conclusions," but with a series of provocations intended to extend the conversation.

Prologue

Stumbling into the conversation

In February 2015, I visited two unusual high schools. I was a third-year graduate student at the time, and my research interests focused on "alternative" high school designs. I'd read or heard about some of the more prominent alternative models and had assembled a list of schools I wanted to see for myself. I arranged to spend a few days at two of these schools, both located in Colorado, where I had recently moved. One of them, called Eagle Rock, is a private residential school perched on a remote mountainside near Rocky Mountain National Park. The other is a public school called Mapleton Early College (MEC), located in a rapidly growing urban community just north of Denver.

Both schools met my definition of "alternative" in that they intentionally deviate from what David Tyack and William Tobin have dubbed the "grammar of schooling"—the familiar patterns of school organization that are so deeply institutionalized as to be rarely noticed or questioned.[1] In high school, the grammar of schooling includes practices like dividing the school day into a series of periods, requiring students to take a certain number of credit hours in the standard academic subjects, grouping students into grade-levels based on their age, and assigning letter grades on an ostensibly standardized scale from A to F. Students typically take at least six courses at a time. Classes typically meet five days per week and run for several months or the entire school year. Teachers are normally assigned to teach a particular subject or discipline and carry a "load" of 100-200 students.

I was interested in Eagle Rock and MEC because they depart from so many of these norms. For instance, Eagle Rock students do not take a prescribed sequence of courses or earn credits in the standard academic subjects. Instead, they choose from among courses with names like Physics of Mountain-biking, Artnatomy, Colorado Rocks, For the Birds, and Social Statistics and Fantasy Baseball. In a course called Winter Ecology, students learn to ski through

the woods, where they also practice identifying, comparing, and contrasting tree and plant species. A course called Heartivism highlights the role of the visual arts in historical and contemporary social movements. In La Telenovela, students at various levels of proficiency in Spanish watch Spanish-language soap operas together, discuss the portrayals of different groups, and produce scenes for their own telenovelas. One class during the winter trimester is entirely devoted to the production of a full-length musical, though it also incorporates a reading and discussion component designed to help the student-actors understand the issues, characters, and themes portrayed in the play.

Courses at Eagle Rock typically run for just five or ten weeks but meet in much longer sessions than courses in conventional schools: two-and-half hours each day, four days a week. Students are generally enrolled in just two classes at any given time, one meeting in the mornings and the other meeting in the afternoons. Each course is framed as a vehicle for developing and demonstrating mastery with respect to one or more of the school's five broad learning expectations: (1) creating healthy life choices, (2) effective communication, (3) leadership for justice, (4) engaged global citizen, and (5) expanding knowledge base. Students must earn a minimum number of credits relevant to each learning expectation before they can graduate. Otherwise, they are free to take—or avoid—any courses they choose.

There are no grades at Eagle Rock, in either sense of the term: students are not grouped into grade-levels based on age, and they do not receive grades based on their performance in courses. They either show sufficient growth through their coursework or they don't, in which case they simply receive no credit. At least in theory, mediocre work that might earn a B- or a C in a conventional high school earns no credit at all at Eagle Rock; nobody graduates based on "seat time." Students are expected to remain at Eagle Rock School for at least six trimesters, "in order for sufficient personal growth and character development to take place to be an Eagle Rock graduate."[2] Beyond that minimum, they can graduate whenever they have fulfilled all requirements.[3] Students keep track of their progress toward graduation using a single-page document known as the Individualized Learning Plan, where they can check off the requirements they have already met and indicate their plans for meeting the rest. At regular intervals, they make "Presentations of Learning," in which they share their best work with panels comprising peers, teachers, and adults from outside the school.

Unlike Eagle Rock, MEC does have grades (both grade-levels and letter grades) and does require its students to take courses in the standard academic subjects. However, MEC students take classes only three days each week. Students spend one day per week off-campus, working in internships; underclassmen start in group placements at pre-selected sites (e.g., a school or a nursing home) and then eventually move into placements of their own choosing. The remaining day of the week is spent in "workshops"—targeted sessions that support students in developing academic skills—and "structured work time." Students use structured work time in part to complete each semester's required independent project, for which students earn elective credits.[4]

Except on internship days, MEC students meet in the morning and afternoon in small groups called advisories. Just about all teachers at MEC lead one of these groups and are known within the school as "advisors." Besides teaching courses in their area of expertise, advisors' responsibilities include building a sense of community within their advisory group, meeting with advisees one-on-one to discuss academic progress and plans, providing coaching and direct instruction as needed, and supervising their advisees' independent projects. Advisors are also integral to the success of the internship program. They assist students in securing placements they want, communicate with mentors to ensure that students have opportunities for meaningful work, visit students at their internship sites, and generally counsel students through the process. Students remain with their advisory group during their first two years at MEC and then are assigned to a new group with a new advisor for the final two years.

Eagle Rock and MEC are both much smaller than typical American high schools, and both serve high proportions of poor and minority youth. Eagle Rock is in fact tiny by high school standards, enrolling just about 70 students at full capacity. Though private, the school is fully funded by the American Honda Foundation, so none of its students pays tuition. Eagle Rock admits only students who "have found success to be elusive in traditional academic programs" and are in danger of dropping out.[5] It also favors applicants who have few other options for completing high school.[6] Otherwise, Eagle Rock describes itself as a "purposefully diverse community" and strives to "balance gender, racial, and ethnic characteristics, geographical origins and economic backgrounds."[7]

MEC serves 240 students, making it more than three times bigger than Eagle Rock, but about a quarter the size of a typical urban or suburban high school. In the early 2000s, the Mapleton school district phased out its single large high school—plagued by low graduation and

attendance rates, severe disciplinary problems, and poor academic performance—and replaced it with more than a dozen smaller schools from which students (or their parents) could choose.[8] MEC was one of the first small schools to open under the initiative.[9] Its student body more or less reflects the demographics of the district as a whole, which is heavily Hispanic and low-income. As of 2015, well over half of MEC students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch, and more than a fifth were designated as English-language learners.

Both Eagle Rock and MEC affiliate with a larger national movement focused on re-engaging young people in their education. Since its opening in 1994, part of the mission of Eagle Rock has been to serve as a "hub" within a larger network of high schools that share a commitment to disrupting conventional patterns of high school organization.[10] To that end, the Eagle Rock Professional Development Center hosts visiting educators who are curious about the school's design and sends its own staff around the country to consult with "educators committed to making high school a more engaging experience for our country's youth." Eagle Rock consultants employ what they call an "asset-based facilitation" model, meaning that the aim is to help partners set their own agendas for school improvement and leverage their own strengths to enact their visions.[11]

One of Eagle Rock's strongest partnerships is with an organization called Big Picture Learning, which advocates for policies and practices designed to make high schools more flexible, relevant, and personal. MEC is among the sixty or so schools affiliated with the Big Picture network. Several of MEC's distinctive design features—its emphasis on advisory, internships, and independent projects—are characteristic of Big Picture schools. MEC does not, however, follow what staff members refer to as the "pure" Big Picture model, based on the original and flagship Big Picture school in Providence, Rhode Island.[12] The original Big Picture school dispensed entirely with classes; the expectation was that students would work with their advisors to meet all of the school's required learning goals through an individualized combination of independent study, independent projects, ad hoc tutorials, enrollment in college courses, and internships. MEC adopted this design when it first opened, but within just a few years, disappointing results on state achievement tests led the school's staff to shift toward a more "blended" curriculum that includes direct instruction in core academic subjects. This sort of local adaptation of the original model is both common and, broadly speaking, encouraged within the Big Picture network.[13]

When I began making plans to visit these schools, I had already read quite a bit about Eagle Rock.[14] I knew MEC only as the Big Picture school in metro Denver, but I was well versed in the basic principles of the Big Picture organization.[15] I was eager to finally see both schools in action: to sit in on classes, to wander the hallways, and to chat casually with students.[16] Above all, I looked forward to conversations with the faculty and school leaders. I wanted to speak with them, teacher to (former) teacher, about the challenges and opportunities presented by their schools' unusual features.

Going into these conversations, I thought I knew what made these schools tick—what their Big Idea was for engaging adolescents in school. Specifically, I thought that their Big Idea could be summed up by the phrase, "learning through interests." It seemed to me that the designs of both Eagle Rock and MEC embodied the theory that people learn best when they are allowed to pursue the questions, topics, activities, and goals that interest them.

This wasn't a big leap: learning through interests is a prominent theme in the literature I had read about both Eagle Rock and Big Picture. Lois Brown Easton, a former member of Eagle Rock's leadership team, explained in her book on the school that Eagle Rock doesn't require students to take courses organized around prescriptive content standards so that "students can pursue their passions (and instructors can teach them)."[17] Similarly, two of the pillars of the Big Picture model—internships and independent projects—are explicitly framed as interest-based learning opportunities.[18] Dennis Littky, one of the co-founders of the Big Picture network, has said that while it's important for a school to have well-defined learning goals, "too often our thinking starts with the learning goals instead of with student interests."[19]

There is something intuitive about this idea that "starting" with student interests could serve as a powerful antidote to widespread disengagement in schools. Certainly, it is hard to deny that the various interests adolescents bring with them to school are assets that educators can leverage. Yet I could also see some potential problems with the idea of relying on students' interests to drive their learning.   Aren't schools supposed to spark new interests, in addition to stoking pre-existing ones? Is interest in a particular topic or subject-matter sufficient to motivate sustained and disciplined effort?[20]   And what if students just aren't interested in some of the things they need to know or be able to do?

I wanted to know how teachers and administrators at Eagle Rock and MEC thought about these questions. My plan, basically, was to ask them.[21] I thought I'd elicit some insights into the

power and limits of interest as a basis for curriculum design, and maybe some vivid accounts of the process of actually working with student interests. To some extent, I got what I came for. But I also left with the feeling that I had it all wrong. From my informants' perspective, "learning through interests" was not the primary pedagogical commitment that distinguishes these schools. It was secondary to—and really an expression of—something else they deemed more essential to their success: their commitment to building "relationships" with their students.

To underscore this point, let me show you how the conversations unfolded.

Everybody I spoke with at Eagle Rock and MEC readily agreed that their schools were designed to capitalize on student interests. Early in our conversation, Eagle Rock's Curriculum Director pointed out a poster hanging in the single large faculty office, on which students had recorded—in a fantastic explosion of color, arrows, check-marks, boxes, and words—all the things they wanted to learn. She told me that the poster was the product of the first "community meeting" of the trimester, at which students "talked about what's on their mind interest-wise, and if their interests could drive their academics—which they know is a common theme here—what do they want to do." The primary purpose of this exercise was to help the faculty generate ideas for new courses. The Curriculum Director confirmed that Eagle Rock's commitment to honoring student interests runs deep, even to the point that "an Eagle Rock graduate can graduate without taking a math class." She acknowledged that "some people believe that's a huge disservice we're doing to our students." But "for us, it's more about [the students'] learning how they learn and how to engage deeply and critically with information. And so we believe that through interest-based education, they're going to be much more on board and much more engaged."

At MEC, a few staff members explained the role of interest in the school's curriculum by invoking a distinction between "interests" and "passions." An interest might be a topic or activity that a student wants to spend some time exploring, whereas a passion is something that students already have some experience with and are committed to pursuing over the long-term, possibly as a career or lifelong hobby. I heard a number of success stories about students for whom interests blossomed into passions through a felicitous sequence of internships and independent projects. One advisor told me about a student who "was really into cupcakes, obsessed with bakeries and cupcakes." The student interned at a bakery, where she did in fact

learn to make cupcakes. But through that experience, she decided that she doesn't just want to bake—she wants to own her own business. So her next internship was at an arts non-profit, where she learned some of "the basics" of organizational management. Then, in eleventh grade, she took a college course in business instead of completing an internship. As a senior, she found an internship in the marketing department of a local cable-wire distributor. According to her advisor, this student "has gone from the baking as a 'cool I want to bake' to 'now I want to start my own business and go to Johnson & Wales [University]' because that's the school that combines culinary arts with business."

Even as my informants recalled successes in engaging students through their interests, they were quick to acknowledge some of the challenges inherent in that approach. Some instructors at Eagle Rock mentioned that it can be hard to find areas where the passions of students and staff intersect. Another observed that "sometimes students don't know what they're interested in"—or, at least, getting students to articulate what they're interested in can be a challenge because "they haven't had a lot of experiences... it's not like they have ten things in their back pocket that they want to look into." Educators at MEC noted that the interests students do articulate sometimes seem narrow or inappropriate. One advisor speculated that most MEC students haven't had many of the kind of experiences that spark wide-ranging interests "partly because they're young, and partly because of the demographic we have that has limited—because of poverty—has limited their exposure to the world." Another agreed that "when you're working with teenagers, they sometimes come with a very limited scope of interests, and they don't really know what they're interested in until they're exposed to it all of a sudden" and decide they want to learn more.

Moreover, educators at both schools noted that even when students are hooked into a project, internship, or course by a genuine interest, that initial pull may not be sufficient to sustain the student through a productive learning experience. One MEC advisor admitted that "frankly, interests aren't powerful enough to do that for most students, unless they're doing something they're truly passionate about." Even when students are "super interested" in a topic, he explained, they are likely to disengage when they run up against "academic challenges"—issues with reading comprehension or writing mechanics, for example—that they don't feel equipped to meet. "If those challenges are great enough... they'll counterbalance the power of [the student's] interest, and he'll shut down and the project will not be successful."

It was when I asked my informants to explain how they deal with these challenges that the focus of the conversation began to shift. For nearly everybody I spoke with, at both schools, the answer was always the same. What makes interest-based learning possible, they told me, was their "relationships" with students.

One specific point I heard a lot is that relationships are what enable students to discover new interests. Eagle Rock's Curriculum Director, for example, told me that students often take courses in subjects that they would never have claimed an interest in because the school has such an intense focus on relationships and "those relationships become stronger than the content." As one Eagle Rock instructor put it, "a lot of what sparks interest sometimes is also that somebody else is really excited about it, so you want to see what they're excited about." On the other hand, she added, "if they don't have a relationship with you, they're not going to be invested in what you're trying to do. If some random person off the street is trying to tell me how to live my life, why am I going to listen to them?" Several MEC advisors echoed this point, suggesting that an important source of new interests for young people is positive interactions with adults they admire who have passions and interests of their own.

Equally important is the flow of interests from students to teachers. My informants suggested that students' interests are likely to mature into meaningful learning opportunities only when they find affirmation and support for those interests from adults who seem to share (or at least appreciate) them. Thus, it is not enough simply to tell students that they are allowed to pursue their interests; students need to feel confident that their teachers will be able to relate somehow to whatever it is they want to pursue. One Eagle Rock instructor explained it this way:

> If a student doesn't believe that I can understand where they're coming from, we're not going to ever have a conversation, let alone a connection, that gets us to the point where I'm supporting their learning, where I'm supporting them doing something they're passionate about.

Likewise, a few MEC advisors stressed the importance of trying to "have a conversation" with students around their interests. The critical thing, they explained, is to know the student well enough to be able to intuit the deeper affinities that may lie behind the specific interest that the student has expressed. Once the advisor understands what *about* a given topic or activity interests a student, the advisor can shed light on opportunities for pursuing the interest that may not yet have occurred to the student.

Expanding on this theme, one MEC advisor indicated that many of the most successful interest-based projects are born of interactions that could occur only in the context of an unusually open student-relationship. He offered the example of a student researching how teenage girls choose a form of birth control. The project arose, he said, from a series of conversations with the student about her own circumstances and choices. He challenged her to develop the expertise necessary to make well-informed decisions for herself—and to serve as a resource for her peers. When I wondered aloud whether it might be awkward to support a high-school student through a project on such a personal and sensitive topic, the advisor replied, "I think we're just on that level here with our kids."

I was beginning to get the picture. Our interests, I was learning, are so intimately bound up in our social relationships, that it is impossible to separate the idea of encouraging students to pursue their interests from the idea of engaging them in meaningful personal relationships. Valuing students' interests, then, can be understood as subsidiary to a broader commitment to valuing them as persons. Indeed, Eagle Rock's curriculum director framed the school's "focus on student interest" in exactly this way:

> I think that the focus on student interest is really a school or community value that the students are known as individuals... I think maybe one of the biggest reasons we have success here is because we have the gift of various puzzle pieces that lets each student feel like they are truly known. So that's where student interest comes in. Like, if we know them and they get to work on knowing themselves better, we can work with them on what their path looks like. And it may not mean that everything they do is in line with those interests, but it means that they're known and almost gives them more permission to wander through different interests because they feel like someone has taken the time to get to know them, and they've gotten more time to get to know themselves.

From this perspective, "learning through interests" is not just about freeing students from the constraints of an inflexible curriculum. It is about creating and sustaining the sort of social bonds in which individuals' interests can grow, deepen, and change.

My other informants at Eagle Rock left no doubt that they view their relationships with students as primary to any other strategy for engaging them. One instructor said that she sees "these relationships, these dynamics... [as] being the largest translatable, fundamental difference between this school and elsewhere." She contrasted the relationships at Eagle Rock with "the brick wall" that separates students and teachers in other settings (such as the university where she had previously taught). In those settings, she suggested, the teacher's attitude is "you don't

need to know me, and I don't need to know you, and you do need to listen to me, and all that kind of stuff—as opposed to respecting one another; not demanding respect, but giving it." She speculated that the breakdown of the "brick wall" is especially impactful for "students that are disengaged." After all, she noted, "I know that I was disengaged myself in classes where I didn't feel like I liked the teacher, or that I didn't respect the teacher. So I might not do the work you tell me to because I don't like you... So I think that's one big takeaway."

Another Eagle Rock instructor pointed to the small size and residential character of the school as enabling—and perhaps compelling—the kind of relationships that set the school apart. In her view,

> Eagle Rock is not just a job, it's a lifestyle. And it's very much about the relationships that you build with students. And, I see them in class, and then I see them at dinner. And then I see them at intramurals. So it's like, you're always interacting with each other. Which upon thinking about that, like oh my god: if you have a fight with a student and then you have to see them five more times that day, it's almost like you dread it. But I think it just allows for more maturity and accountability.

She explained that the need for Eagle Rock students and staff to come to terms with each other as community members—the impossibility of restricting their relationship to the daily business of covering material—gives students a "connection" to the school that is typically missing in larger, more impersonal environments. She speculated that "so much about students who do feel disengaged or disinterested in traditional models is that they don't have the relationships because the teachers are worked so much with so many students."

Although MEC does not quite replicate the intimacy of the residential community at Eagle Rock, the advisors I spoke with at MEC were no less emphatic about the distinctiveness of the relationships in their school. This advisor's comment is fairly typical:

> I think the key takeaways would be both how students talk to each other and how the adults interact with students... When I had Teach for America [field instructors] coming in, they were almost like, "I think your relationships with students are too casual." But that's very much the relationship model, that it's not this disciplinarian figure. You know, it's a first-name basis school. And so I feel like if I were just a visitor, I would notice how teachers interact with students, and it looks very different.

I asked her to elaborate on the difference, and she explained that compared with her own high school experience in a "traditional school," her interactions with students "look more like this personal, more of a mentor relationship, where it's something you'd want to share with a caring adult in your life." Especially with the students in her advisory—which meets both at the

beginning and end of each day—many conversations revolve around "what's going on at home. Are you doing okay? This morning you looked down and now you seem better."

Another advisor told me that the "first thing" visitors take away from the school is "the sense of community that we have, and they pick up on the relationships we have with students and how well we know the students—how healthy the social interactions are here between students and between staff and students." A few moments later, he added that advisories often use the metaphor of "family" to capture the sort of bonds that advisors hope to foster. "It's not a replacement for family," he clarified. "But we want it to feel like a family and have that level of comfort and closeness and support that students will ideally have in their home environment."

One advisor admitted that though he knew coming in to MEC that there would be an "emphasis" on building relationships in advisory, the starkness of the contrast with the "very traditional" middle school where he had previously taught required some adjustment. "Coming to this school," he remembers, the relationships were

> just much deeper than I had expected at first. Just the level of sharing. What was okay to talk about. Even things like swearing... Especially building relationships with advisory students, when we have connection circles, students will oftentimes reveal some pretty intimate or deep details about family life, friend relationships, and things they may not feel comfortable sharing with even their parents, yet they will feel comfortable expressing that to me and the rest of our advisory. And so just honoring the trust and honoring that our advisory is a safe place to get those things out is of the utmost importance. And to encourage that, I will reveal even what I would think to be even inappropriate stories to my students. So, experiences of like, drinking in college, or something that I would never, ever, ever come even to close to talking about at another school, here it's okay.

He added that "the relationship piece from advisory definitely carries over into the classroom." Because it's "such a part of our school culture to be close with your advisor," it "becomes part of school culture to become close with each of your class teachers as well."

Yet another advisor described the key to engaging students as being someone who will take the time to joke around with them, to laugh and cry with them, "just being that real person in their life—that makes a huge difference, it really does... Kids just want to know that even though you're their teacher, on some level you're kind of there always." Like many of his colleagues at MEC, this advisor gives every student he teaches his cell phone number; when he took parental leave, he maintained a dedicated Facebook page to stay in touch. He told me that when students start to disengage in his classes, he wants to be able to sit down with them and

say, "'When have I never been there for you? When have you asked for help, and I said no?' Like, I've got you, I'm here for you. And that, more than anything else with this population means more than anything." You can "develop this really elaborate way of engaging kids," he concluded, "but in all reality, if you want to engage kids, I think you want to meet them on the relationship level first."

The significance advisors attach to their relationships with students is reflected in the style and perspective of the school's leadership. The current principal was in his second year at MEC when we met. He told me that when he interviewed for the job, he "was really straightforward" with the hiring committee "that I'm a relationship person." Indeed, he says he was attracted to MEC in part because when he visited, he immediately bonded with the students; their comfort level in wanting to meet and engage with him was a good fit for his own personality. Likewise, when he hires teachers, he says that what he looks for is, "even more than content, how are you at building relationships? How are you at understanding teenagers?" At the end of our interview, the principal returned to this theme:

> We forget to enjoy the fact that these kids want to be here for some reason other than learning trigonometry, or learning about World War II, or the Byzantine empire... They're here because they want to make relationships. And yes, a lot of that comes with their peers, but we lose sight of the fact that they want to make relationships with us if we just allow that to happen.

The principal recognized that focusing on relationships with every student is "difficult at a big school, but here at Mapleton, where we have 250, 240 kids, it's our duty to take that next step and turn that relationship into something that is impactful."

An administrator at MEC with the title "Instructional Guide," whose duties include observing and coaching teachers and planning school-wide professional development, staked out an especially strong position on the primacy of relationships:

> I would say that the number one contributing factor to engaging students in their education is relationships with the person who is delivering the content. I would say that relationships trump all. And that if that kid doesn't think that you're a person, and if that kid doesn't think that you value them as a person, it doesn't matter how interesting you are, it doesn't matter whether or not your interests and their interests are identical, it just doesn't matter. You have to have a relationship first.

She noted that while this premise is broadly acknowledged and supported by research, MEC is one of the few schools actually structured to support relationship-building. "I did the math," she

told me. Out of a 40-hour school week, "we spend sixteen hours developing relationships one-on-one with students."

As we prepared to wrap up our conversation, the Instructional Guide suggested that I reconsider the initial focus of my research questions in light of what I'd learned. "You came here thinking that we were an interest-based school and Big Picture model," she observed. "And I would say that that's very secondary to relationships—that what we take from Big Picture is advisory, not interests and passions. So that might just change your direction."

My visits to Eagle Rock and MEC did indeed change my direction. I had arrived at the schools ready to talk about interest-driven curricula and stumbled instead into a conversation about the importance of student-teacher relationships. If I were to go back to Eagle Rock and MEC, I would ideally like to talk with students about how they experience these relationships; even better, I would like to observe more of the interactions I had heard so much about. But in the meantime, I wanted to know who else was part of the conversation and what they were saying. A little digging quickly led me into a vast body of scholarly literature that both confirms and complicates the thesis that "you have to have a relationship first."

Some of the evidence for this thesis comes from more interviews like the ones I conducted at Eagle Rock and MEC. For instance: in the early 1990s, a pair of researchers asked students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff in four ethnically diverse California school districts to discuss what they saw as "the problems with schooling." Student-teacher relationships topped the list. "Participants feel the crisis inside schools is directly related to human relationships," the authors reported. "Most often mentioned were relationships between teachers and students."[22] Another source of evidence comes from case-studies of successful teachers. As scholar-activist Jeff Duncan-Andrade put it, "The adage 'students don't care what you know until they know that you care,' is supported by numerous studies of effective educators."[23] The lesson of these studies, he concludes, is that "at the end of the day, effective teaching depends most heavily on one thing: deep and caring relationships."

Versions of that conclusion have won broad acceptance among education scholars. In 2003, a joint committee of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine issued a report on epidemic levels of disengagement in American high schools. Based on research

demonstrating the "importance of social relationships" for "positive youth development" both in and out of school, the committee recommended a new priority for high schools: helping adolescents form "caring relationships with adults" that address their "need for safety, love and belonging, respect, power, and accomplishment."[24] The report cites studies purporting to show that "communal schools… structured to facilitate the creation of emotional bonds between teachers and students and also among teachers" produce "better outcomes" than more "bureaucratic schools" that rely on "affectively neutral social relationships to facilitate the administration of standardized rules and procedures."[25]

These studies are part of a program of research that aims to quantify the link between the quality of students' relationships with teachers and their academic achievement or engagement. Two meta-analyses of dozens of such studies have concluded that positive student-teacher relationships are "effective" overall,[26] though at least one prominent study produced contrary results and argues that a focus on improving student-teacher relationships may be misguided.[27] We will take a much closer—and more critical—look at this whole genre of research later in the dissertation. For now, I'll just note that some scholars consider the matter of establishing the importance of student-teacher relationships settled. One recent study, for example, begins with the observation that "a multidisciplinary body of empirical evidence reveals that students' affective relationships with teachers are associated with a host of important outcomes such as academic engagement and attainment."[28]

Such enthusiasm for the power of social relationships is by no means limited to the field of education. Research on relationships in general is booming. In November 2015, *Current Opinion in Psychology* devoted its inaugural special issue to the "young" but "thriving" discipline of "relationship science," which integrates "knowledge across diverse fields within the social, behavioral, and life sciences."[29] The aim of the discipline is to construct and test detailed conceptual models of how close relationships of all kinds form—among family members, romantic partners, work colleagues, and others—and how they contribute to human flourishing.

In the same month, Robert Waldinger, the current director of the longest-running longitudinal study of human happiness, announced the "clearest" lesson of the study: "good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."[30] Addressing a TED audience, Waldinger explained that "people who are more connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected. And

the experience of loneliness turns out to be toxic." He claimed that the best predictor of whether a study participant would live to be a "happy, healthy octogenarian" was their reported level of satisfaction with their relationships at age 50.

A couple months before Waldinger's talk, Hilary Cottam took the TED stage to describe a new approach to social services that she has been pioneering in the United Kingdom. The idea behind Cottam's approach, which she calls "relational welfare," is to design systems for engaging socially isolated individuals in meaningful relationships, both with each other and with the professional social workers assigned to help them. Cottam argues that such relationships— "the simple human bonds between us, a kind of authentic sense of connection"—are "the critical resource we have in solving" problems associated with poverty, aging, and unemployment.[31]

Relationships are also, apparently, a critical untapped resource for ensuring business success—at least according to a couple new self-help books I happened upon while browsing airport bookstores in the last year. In *Thirteeners*, Dan Prosser argues that "87 percent of companies fail to execute the strategy they set for a given year" because—unlike the successful 13 percent—they have failed to foster the right kind of relationships among their employees.[32] Similarly, the author of *Cultivate: The Power of Winning Relationships* insists that "it's the quality of your working relationships that has the greatest impact on your success" and promises to teach readers exactly how they can cultivate more "ally relationships."[33]

So relationships are, in a word, "hot" in today's popular and social-scientific discourse. Of course, nobody claims to have made an especially novel discovery in identifying good relationships as essential to everything we humans do. The notion, rather, is that we have somehow managed to forget what we have always known about the paramount importance of relationships. Waldinger, for instance, notes that though his message about the link between good relationships and wellbeing is "wisdom that is as old as the hills," we routinely fall into the trap of investing more heavily in personal achievement than in cultivating and maintaining the bonds that sustain us. In a similar manner, proponents of adopting a more relational focus in practically every domain of life tend to frame their thesis as obvious, yet overlooked; intuitive, yet disruptive; indisputable, yet radical. Despite its apparent banality, the observation that relationships matter is supposed to have counter-cultural implications.

This is certainly true in the domain of education, where the formation of "deep and caring" student-teacher relationship is often portrayed as subversive of the bureaucratic culture

of schools. Consider the story of Erin Gruwell, the teacher whose first years in an inner-city Los Angeles classroom were famously depicted in the movie *Freedom Writers*.[34] Gruwell's story is, in part, about a teacher struggling to reach across race and class to forge a productive working relationship with her students. But it is also a story about how she had to take on (or go around) "the system" to form those relationships—departing from the mandated curriculum, organizing unofficial field trips at her own expense, and withstanding the hostility of those colleagues who disapproved of (or felt threatened by) the ways she related to students.

Likewise, several of my informants at Eagle Rock and MEC understood their own schools' commitment to cultivating positive student-teacher relationships as iconoclastic. One MEC advisor told me that visitors to the school tend to respond with surprise—or skepticism—to the sheer amount of time devoted to relationship-building. He told me that people sometimes "don't connect the dots" between all the work on relationships and academic engagement. Observers, he said, can "look at things superficially and ask why they spend an hour a day in advisory doing connection circles and playing games and say, 'Where's the value of that? Why aren't they working on math?'"

Winning over skeptics, however, isn't the only challenge. Even if there were consensus around an alternative paradigm of schooling that prioritizes student-teacher relationships, that paradigm would surely entail its own distinctive set of problems and limitations. Indeed, none of the people I spoke with at Eagle Rock or MEC suggested that focusing on relationships would be a panacea. Several of them, particularly at MEC, were open about their own struggles within the context of a school community where relationships with students are unusually intense.

One MEC advisor, for instance, admitted that there is "an emotional burden" in knowing so much about, and feeling so much responsibility for, the students in her advisory—especially in a school where homelessness and other extreme stressors are prevalent. "You bring home the kids' baggage with you," she said. "And they have your phone, they have your email. It's this constant flow of information, which is really beneficial for kids but can sometimes, you know, I think just wear on you emotionally." She described this as one version of the broader challenge of setting appropriate boundaries, and several of her colleagues underscored the importance and difficulty of clearly defining the parameters of the student-teacher relationship.   A few emphasized that their relationships with students should be that of neither a parent nor a friend. But beyond those bright lines, the boundaries tend to get fuzzy. One advisor said that questions

about what might be appropriate to share with students about himself fall into a much larger gray area at MEC than they would at a conventional school, where distinctions between "what to say, what not to say" are more clear-cut. The Instructional Guide noted that staff members do not all resolve these kinds of dilemmas in precisely the same way, and advisors' discomfort with the boundaries that their colleagues do or don't set can sometimes cause tension within the faculty.

Then there is a further complication: variation in the way students respond to teachers' attempts to build relationships with them. Several of the educators I spoke with at MEC indicated that the school's relational focus might be particularly appropriate for the population the school serves—meaning poor and minority students—which is consistent with many researchers' hypothesis that positive student-teacher relationships are especially beneficial for "students from nondominant groups."[35] On the other hand, both the Instructional Guide and the principal at MEC readily acknowledged that the kind of relationships that characterize life at the school may not be the right fit for all individuals within the school's "demographic." Some students, they say, leave MEC precisely because they do not want or need the kind of closeness the school offers. This observation is consistent with research describing the tensions that arise when students experience teachers' personal interest in them as inauthentic or intrusive.[36]

Thus, the educators I met at Eagle Rock and MEC were neither dogmatic nor complacent in commending a more relational approach to student engagement. They saw their own efforts to build a learning community around good relationships as very much a work-in-progress. To be sure, many of my informants were proud of their accomplishments in forging unusually strong relationships with their students—and proud of their schools for creating a context in which those relationships were possible. A few were sharply critical of the tendency of policymakers to neglect the importance of student-teacher relationships in the design of systemic school improvement initiatives. But none of the people I spoke with suggested that focusing on relationships is an easy-to-follow prescription; rather, they framed it as an ongoing process and an ongoing conversation.

In that spirit, the chapters that follow continue the conversation I stumbled into at Eagle Rock and MEC. Many of the voices that have contributed to this prologue will remain in the conversation, joined by a host of new interlocutors. Our point of departure will be the suggestion

that we concentrate our school reform efforts on improving student-teacher relationships; our goal will be to better understand that suggestion and its ramifications. Throughout the conversation, I use the phrase "school reform" as innocently as possible—referring not to any particular model or framework for improving schools, but rather to the widespread (if not universal) view that there must be some dramatic changes to the way we organize the learning opportunities available to young people.

Although our focus will be on a phenomenon I keep calling "student-teacher relationships," it is of course impossible to isolate the relationship between any one teacher and any one student from the much larger web of social relationships in which students and teachers are embedded. The renowned developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner referred to this broader social (and material) environment as "the child's ecology." Writing in 1974, Bronfenbrenner complained that "existing theoretical models in human development typically assume a two-person system only"; he argued that an "ecological" perspective, in contrast, would highlight interactions among the many relationships (and other forces) that constitute the developing person's environment.[37] An ecological perspective would, for example, illuminate the ways in which a whole host of different relationships—between a teacher and an individual student, between the same teacher and other students, between the teacher and the class, among peers, among teachers, between teachers and administrators, between teachers and parents, between parents and children, between a child's parents, and so on—all influence one another. So while our focus may be on the unique significance of the relationship that forms between a young person and his or her teacher, I will strive at least sporadically to keep the social ecology surrounding any given "two-person system" in view.

Now, perhaps you enter this conversation already sharing the intuition that "student-teacher relationships" are a sensible focus for school reformers. After all, when you think back on the teachers who made the biggest difference in your life, you might be thinking of those teachers with whom you felt especially close. You might be thinking of the teachers you looked forward to seeing each day, the ones who knew you best, the ones who kept in contact with you long after you had moved on from their classrooms. You might remember a gesture of warmth or support that showed how much a teacher cared about you. You might remember bonding with a teacher over some mutual passion or hobby, or rising to a challenge issued by a teacher who

expressed confidence in you. It is reasonable to suppose that if these kinds of positive student-teacher relationships were the norm rather than the exception, schools would be much better.

But you might also have some questions about the suggestion that student-teacher relationships are a key and neglected piece of the school reform puzzle. For one thing, how should we define a "good" student-teacher relationship? What exactly is the connection between these relationships and students' learning or wellbeing? What can be done to foster better student-teacher relationships throughout the school system? What are the risks and limitations of school reform strategies that focus on improving the quality of these relationships? How might empirical research inform our understanding of the contexts, processes, and effects of relationship-based reform strategies?

These are some of the questions that will occupy us in the chapters that follow. I propose to approach these (and other) questions by critically examining a wide range of scholarly texts that touch, directly or indirectly, on the role student-teacher relationships play in schooling. In very broad terms, then, the project I've undertaken fits within the genre of scholarship known as research synthesis—the attempt to bring together and make sense of knowledge that has accumulated, over time, by many different hands.

The term "research synthesis," however, encompasses a diverse array of sub-genres and methodological traditions.[38] In some academic and policy circles, recent trends favor syntheses that apply formal, specialized "techniques" for gathering and analyzing data.[39] Perhaps the most highly-developed methodology within this category, known as "meta-analysis," involves a set of techniques for combining data from several statistical studies to create larger samples; the idea is that statistical models based on data from many studies will be more reliable than models based on data from any one study. Other approaches have been described as more "methodologically inclusive," in that they incorporate both statistical and non-statistical forms of data.[40] These approaches may vary in the detail and formality of the methods they specify for bounding their search for relevant literature and for working with the sources they collect. They also vary in their substantive aims: generalizing about what the research tends to show on the whole, "mapping" the field, identifying gaps in current knowledge, critiquing particular lines of research, distinguishing among different streams of research, reconciling inconsistent findings, and so on.

In thinking about the purposes of the research synthesis I wanted to produce, I leaned on a distinction Margaret Eisenhart has drawn between literature reviews that aim to "settle things" and those that aim to "expand, rather than settle, the possibilities for human understanding and educational practice."[41] Eisenhart suggests that one function of a research synthesis could be to reveal an idea or phenomenon as much more complicated, varied, multi-faceted, and interesting than it initially appeared. That is what I am aiming at in this dissertation: to add some dimension to the seemingly straightforward idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships. Certainly, I do not expect to settle anything; I hope to seed a conversation, not end it.

Eisenhart argues that scholarship that does not aim to "settle things" often cannot—and need not—justify itself "by the criteria of conventional research."[42]   In particular, she suggests that formalized, codified techniques and procedures "are not the gold standard" for literature reviews that seek to equip readers to think more deeply and broadly about a phenomenon. I tend to agree. My own "methods" of constructing this dissertation are best described in relatively informal terms. Essentially, I set out to get some sense of what contemporary scholars have been saying about student-teacher relationships—the variety of different ideas they're drawing on, the range of research they've produced—and then use the sources I'd collected to organize a kind of written symposium on the topic.

The mode of inquiry I adopt throughout the dissertation could fairly be called philosophical. Philosophy is sometimes caricatured as an exercise in armchair speculation—a matter of abstract logical deduction—rather than an "empirical" inquiry. But philosophy can be understood instead as a commitment to making sense of concrete experience by thinking through the categories, concepts, and conjectures we use to frame and respond to problems.[43]   It is difficult to specify formal methods for thinking something through, and there is no point at which we can say that we're *done* thinking. Engaging in some philosophical play around the claims I heard at Eagle Rock and MEC will not necessarily resolve anything; it might, however, yield some useful and energizing thoughts about teaching and learning, the organization of schooling, and education research. As Elliot Eisner put it, "what good work should do in philosophy and elsewhere is to enrich and enliven the conversation. There should be a sense that it is moving forward, that we seem to be getting somewhere."[44]

To me, part of what it means to "enrich and enliven the conversation" is to draw more people into it. Thus, one of my goals for the dissertation is to make a dialogue comprising

mostly academic voices accessible to and enjoyable for a wider audience. In addition to professional education scholars and researchers, the audience I have in mind includes many different groups, each with its own needs, purposes, and expectations: classroom teachers across (and beyond) the K-12 spectrum, school leaders, policymakers, college and graduate students concentrating in education, other engaged citizens, and so on. There is, I am afraid, no way to communicate with all of these audiences equally well at the same time. Nonetheless, I hope at least to provide sufficiently adequate explanations of technical terms and theoretical constructs to bridge some of the gaps between academic and non-academic audiences.

All that said, the chapters that follow take up some of the most familiar tasks of academic research syntheses. For instance, one very common purpose of literature reviews is to distinguish among related conceptions or ideas. That is more or less the purpose of Chapter 1, which disentangles and interrogates five different conceptions of how and why student-teacher relationships matter. These different conceptions are not mutually exclusive; enthusiasm for the importance of student-teacher relationships may well be animated by some amalgam of the ideas we will consider. Nonetheless, I suggest that it is worthwhile to explore each conception in turn, so that we can consider the distinctive premises and problems that each one entails.

A second task research syntheses might undertake is to examine an instructive range of different initiatives for putting some broad idea into practice. Chapter 2 does this by situating the idea of focusing on student-teacher relationships within (and against) various ongoing school reform efforts. It would, of course, be impossible to represent the full range of institutional strategies for fostering "better" student-teacher relationships. But we will, at least, consider strategies that span a range of different sites within the school system: school-based programming, public accountability systems, and university-based teacher education.

Chapter 3 returns us to the sort of question that drives many conventional research syntheses: what does the research show about the idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships? Rather than answering that question, however, I reinterpret it as an invitation to consider the affordances and constraints of different genres of empirical research. Starting with an analysis of some prior attempts to synthesize evidence on the "effectiveness" of student-teacher relationships, I argue that the highly generalized conclusions generated by such research are of limited utility. Ultimately, I join others in arguing for the usefulness of research products—including stories and essays that are not always regarded as research at all—that are

designed to help readers think more creatively about the possibilities for action within their own contexts. This dissertation is intended to fall into precisely that category.

Although I do not provide anything close to a complete historical narrative of the development of the ideas we will encounter, it will quickly become apparent to readers that the conversation we are engaged in has a past. The conversation has, indeed, been going on for quite some time, inspiring a variety of pedagogical and organizational experiments with predictably mixed results. Acknowledging that history reinforces a point I have been at pains to make: the purpose of the dissertation is not to assess some recent innovation that promises finally to rescue public education. On the contrary, my intention is to offer an alternative to the ongoing search for ready-made innovations and solutions. Rather than casting the idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships as a fixed solution-set that either does or doesn't work, I hope to present it as a way of naming the problem—a way of focusing our attention on a particular tangle of challenges and possibilities.

Chapter Notes

[1] Tyack & Tobin, 1994.

[2] Eagle Rock website, "Academics," as of May 2016.

[3] Although students generally fulfill graduation requirements through coursework, "other activities such as teaching a class, participation in service projects off campus, or independent study plans serve occasionally as mechanisms for earning credit" (Eagle Rock website). Besides demonstrating mastery of each of the school's five learning expectations, each Eagle Rock student must also complete several "required experiences." These include two wilderness trips (at the beginning and end of their time at Eagle Rock), regular kitchen duty, and a portfolio of service learning projects (including a "legacy" project that creates a lasting benefit for the school community).

[4] As its name implies, MEC operates an "Early College" program. The program affords students in the upper grades opportunities to enroll in courses at a local community college, concurrently earning credits toward both their high school diploma and an associate's degree. However, funding for the program is limited and admission is highly selective. Most students at the school were apparently not enrolled in the Early College program, and the program was not the focus of my research at MEC.

[5] *See* Easton, 2007.

[6] Eagle Rock website, "Admissions." Successful applicants must also demonstrate a "commitment to making a change" (i.e., that coming to Eagle Rock would be a voluntary choice) and an "understanding of Eagle Rock" (including their acceptance of the school's "non-negotiable" prohibitions of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, violence, and sex).

[7] Eagle Rock website, "Quick Facts" and "Admissions."

[8] Larry Cuban and colleagues recount the story of the Mapleton School District's implementation of this reform initiative, branded "Small by Design," in a 2010 book titled *Against the Odds*.

[9] To be more precise, MEC is the product of a merger of two schools that opened as part of the district's small school initiative: one focused on internships and project-based learning, and the other on an early college program. The schools shared a building and a principal before they merged into a single unit.

[10] *See* Eagle Rock website, "Mission and Philosophy."

[11] Eagle Rock website, "About the Eagle Rock Professional Development Center" (video).

[12] The school is called Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, or "The Met" for short. The school is profiled in depth by Eliot Levine in his 2002 book, *One Kid at a Time: Big Lessons From a Small School*.

[13] *See* McDonald, Klein, & Riordan, 2008.

[14] The school's history and design are well-documented. *See* Easton, 2007; Paulson, 2000; and Kotlowitz, 1998.

[15] Besides Levine's book, Big Picture schools are the subject of a number of articles and essays. *See* Klein, 2008; Washor & Mojkowski, 2006; McDonald, Klein, & Riordan, 2008; Littky & Grabelle, 2004; Adler, 2005.

[16] My research project was subject to review by my university's Institutional Review Board. To streamline the review process, I did not seek permission to interview minors (i.e. students) about their experience in these schools. I did have some informal interactions with students but do not report the content of those interactions here.

[17] Easton, 2007, p. 98.

[18] *See, e.g.*, Levine, 2002, especially Chapter 3: Learning Through Interests.

[19] *Id.*, p. 96.

[20] Cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham makes a similar point in his 2010 book, *Why Students Don't Like School*. He put it this way: "I don't think content drives interest... We've all attended a lecture or watched a TV show (perhaps against our will) about a subject we thought we weren't interested in, only to find ourselves fascinated; and it's easy to get bored even when you usually like the topic.... The content of a problem—whether it's about sex or human motivation—may be sufficient to prompt your interest, but it won't maintain it." (pp. 10-12).

[21] At both schools, I requested interviews with the Principal or Head, any school leader responsible for curriculum development and professional learning, and three to five teachers. In almost all cases, participating teachers volunteered in response to emails sent to the full faculty (at MEC, the email was sent by the principal; at Eagle Rock, it was sent by a staff member in the Professional Development Center). The interviews themselves were all conducted in-person, one-on-one, on the schools' campuses. At Eagle Rock, I interviewed the Head of School, Curriculum Director, Director of Professional Development, and three Instructional Specialists (i.e. teachers). I also had a campus tour and orientation meeting with the Associate Director of Professional Development. At MEC, I interviewed the director (i.e. principal), another senior school leader (the "Instructional Guide"), the internship coordinator (who also teaches math), and six teacher/advisors.

[22] Poplin & Weeres, 1994, p. 12.

[23] Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 191 (citing Akom, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

[24] National Research Council/Institute of Medicine, 2003, p. 17.

[25] *Id.*, p. 101.

[26] Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda *et al.*, 2011.

[27] Phillips, 1997.

[28] Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 380.

[29] Finkel & Simpson, 2015.

[30] Waldinger, 2015.

[31] Cottam, 2015.

[32] Prosser, 2015.

[33] Barrett, 2016.

[34] Gruwell described her experiences in a 2007 memoir titled *Teach With Your Heart*.

[35] Phillippo, 2012, p. 442. *See also* Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Olson, 2009; Roorda *et al.*, 2011.

[36] Phillippo, 2012.

[37] Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 3.

[38] *See* Moss & Haertel, 2015, pp. 209-218, for a survey of some of the options open to research synthesists.

[39] *See, e.g.*, Cooper & Hedges, 2009.

[40] Moss & Haertel, 2015, pp. 212-215; Suri & Clarke, 2009.

[41] Eisenhart, 1998, pp. 394, 397.

[42] *Id.*, p. 395.

[43] This conception of philosophy could be linked to any number of philosophers, but I associate it with a former of professor of mine named Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose introduction to contemporary philosophy is titled *Thinking It Through*.

[44] Eisner, 1997, citing Rorty, 1979.

Chapter 1

Articulating the value of student-teacher relationships

The idea that relationships with students are somehow essential to good teaching has an undeniable, if vague, appeal. The task of this chapter is to make the idea a little less vague—to clarify what we mean when we affirm the value of student-teacher relationships. What I'd like to suggest is that we are dealing here not with one idea, but with several distinct ideas. That is, there are a variety of different conceptions of what makes a student-teacher relationship "good" and of how good student-teacher relationships influence students' learning, wellbeing, or whatever else we might think schools should foster.

Even some of the more specific claims about the value of student-teacher relationships are laced with ambiguity. Consider, for instance, the suggestion that it is critically important for teachers to know their students well. That suggestion does point to a particular quality of student-teacher relationships as especially valuable. But it does not specify what kinds of things teachers should know about their students, what kinds of outcomes knowing students well facilitates, and how exactly knowing students well contributes to those outcomes. There are many ways to fill in those theoretical gaps. Some conceptions might focus on the teacher's knowledge of the student as data the teacher can draw on in tailoring learning opportunities or instructional strategies to the individual. Others might focus on the student's perception or experience of being known as a source of emotional wellbeing—which may be valued in its own right and/or as a source of motivation for the student to engage in the classroom.

As this example shows, distinct conceptions of the value of student-teacher relationships are not necessarily mutually exclusive, or even in tension. It is easy enough

to hold that knowing students well is valuable *both* as a means of promoting their sense of belonging *and* as a means of tailoring instruction. When we affirm the value of student-teacher relationships—or some dimension of student-teacher relationships—we might mean many things at once, without contradicting ourselves.

Nonetheless, I think it is worthwhile to tease apart some of the different possible explanations of why and how student-teacher relationships matter. For one thing, if there did turn out to be tensions between any of these ideas, disentangling them would be the first step toward bringing those tensions to light. But even distinguishing among entirely compatible perspectives on the value of student-teacher relationships serves a useful analytic purpose. Part of what it means for a conception to be distinct is that it adds a layer to our understanding of the role that student-teacher relationships play in schooling. With each additional layer, new premises, processes, problems, and possibilities surface. If our aim is to understand oft-repeated, somewhat ambiguous claims like "you have to have a relationship first," our best option may be to examine the different meanings such a claim might hold, in depth and one at a time.

Of course, there are no natural boundaries demarcating different conceptions of the value of student-teacher relationships—just the ones we construct for the sake of the conversation. So before listing the different conceptions I want to examine, let me briefly describe how I arrived at them. I began by revisiting my notes from Eagle Rock and MEC, trying to distinguish among the various explanations I heard there for why student-teacher relationships are so important. Then, I turned to a handful of articles I had found in major scholarly journals that attempt to summarize or synthesize the large body of empirical literature on the influence of student-teacher relationships and specific strategies for enhancing them. Each of these articles cites one or more lines of reasoning about the value of student-teacher relationships, rooted in fields ranging from motivational psychology and learning theory to multicultural education and feminist ethics. As I expanded my collection of scholarly literature—primarily by adding works that either cited or were cited by the literature I had already found—references to certain key theoretical perspectives and theorists started to recur. I noted some of the distinctive features of these recurring perspectives, gradually adding to and refining a list of assertions about the importance of student-teacher relationships.

As I indicated in the prologue, the resulting discussion cannot be very well described as the product of a formal procedure for gathering and analyzing sources. Unlike some research syntheses, the one I have undertaken did not proceed from a set of explicit criteria for determining which sources would be included in the inquiry and which would be left out. Instead, I just started reading, beginning with some of the more obvious results of a standard search of the Google Scholar database and then mining those sources' bibliographies for additional material. The focus was on contemporary discussions of student-teacher relationships and the historical sources they draw upon (extending at least as far back as the 1960s); but otherwise, I did not have any clear boundaries in mind. The intent was simply to engage in a period of intensive reading and to construct a conversation that incorporates as many as possible of the most salient voices and ideas to emerge from the literature I found.

Whenever conducting research of this kind, one of the biggest challenges is knowing when to "stop" looking for new material, or at least when to shift the focus to analyzing and synthesizing the material that has already been assembled. Although the open-endedness of my search parameters made it hard to define a stopping point in advance, there did come a time in my reading when the rate of encountering new ideas slowed substantially. At that point, the challenge became to organize the large body of source material I had assembled in a way that would be both engaging and edifying for a wide audience.

Ultimately, I decided to structure the conversation around a manageable number of different statements about the primacy of student-teacher relationships in schooling. Because I wanted to keep the discussion grounded as closely as possible in the experience and language of educators, I wanted each statement to sound like something educators might say about why the relationships they form with students are so critical. The goal was to choose statements that would both build on and contrast in interesting ways with one another, serving as springboards to fruitful discussion of the many issues that arise when we begin to contemplate what it means to "have a relationships first." After some adjustments, I ended up with the following five statements:

1. Students try harder in school when they like their teachers.
2. Everybody needs a reliable source of personal support to learn.
3. Students can learn only once their emotional needs have been met.
4. Relationships support students in exercising the agency and initiative on which meaningful learning depends.
5. We should treat the formation of ethical interpersonal relationships as the primary purpose of schooling.

I do not begin with the assumption that these five statements are all true or astute, only that they capture important currents of thought and that riding those currents will get us somewhere. Nor do I mean to suggest that these five statements exhaust all the thinking I've encountered—or could encounter with further research—about the value of student-teacher relationships. They do, however, represent an instructive range of insights into the link between the quality of those relationships and the quality of students' school experience. Despite the various points of overlap among the five statements, each one brings to the fore at least one distinctive idea for us to appreciate and interrogate.

1. Students try harder in school when they like their teachers

When I asked one of the advisors at MEC to explain the link between his school's focus on relationships and its reputation for strong academic performance, he began by noting that "kids do more for you if they like you." He then hastened to add another, more elaborate explanation of how a school-wide relational focus contributes to academic engagement. It was clear that he didn't want to present the observation that "kids do more for you if they like you" as the sole or main reason to prioritize relationships. Yet there it was, the first thing that came to mind, an observation almost too obvious to mention and yet too obvious *not* to mention. Nor was he alone in mentioning it.

I can relate. In all of my various teaching roles, I have more than occasionally worried about how much my students liked me. The intuition that my ability to engage students depended crucially on their feelings about me personally has often felt inescapable. At times, getting my students to like me became a more or less conscious pedagogical strategy. I was aware on some level that this strategy could be counter-

productive—more on that soon—but it remained nonetheless a salient feature of my experience of the student-teacher relationship.

Its salience is not especially mysterious. "Kids do more for you if they like you" is on its face a theory of motivation, and teachers expend a great deal of energy trying to motivate their students to be more productive and attentive in their schoolwork. David K. Cohen calls this preoccupation one of the central "predicaments" of teaching. He observes that "all of a teacher's pedagogical art and craft will be useless unless students embrace the purposes of instruction as their own and seek them with their own art and craft."[1] Yet students whose attendance at school is compulsory never voluntarily agreed to pursue the learning goals prescribed for them, and their cooperation cannot be taken for granted. Even to the extent that students embrace the value of those goals in the abstract, they may be reluctant at times to endure the frustration or tedium it takes to achieve them. Thus, as Cohen puts it, "mobilizing and sustaining" students' commitment in the face of inevitable resistance becomes a "key task" for teachers.

The proposition that "kids do more if they like you" represents one response to the challenge of mobilizing student effort. It locates the source of motivation neither in a purely internal drive to learn, nor in a response to external incentives, but in the student's desire for social connection.[2] As such, it is a paradigmatic example of what we might call a relational theory of motivation. It posits a quality of interpersonal relationships ("liking" the teacher) that is supposed to reliably produce a particular motivational outcome (increased academic effort). The claim is not that students will learn *only* from those teachers they like, but that all else being equal, they will invest more of their energy into learning opportunities presented by people they like more. They might resist learning in a domain that would otherwise excite them because they find the teacher repellent, and they might choose to learn a subject or skill that would otherwise hold little interest for them because they are drawn in some way to the teacher. At both Eagle Rock and MEC, I heard claims like these again and again.

Although it seems intuitive that students might "do more" in school if they like their teachers, the mechanisms involved in that dynamic could be quite varied and are often ambiguous. Is it that students enjoy hanging out with teachers they like, and they see cooperation with a well-liked teacher's learning agenda as the price of enjoying that

teacher's company? Is it that we are all wired, thanks to some advantageous evolutionary adaptation, to value the things valued by the people we like? Is it that students want to please the people they like, and they perceive that their teachers will be pleased by their hard work? Or perhaps the idea is that *dis*liking one's teachers is distracting and demotivating, or that it motivates students to actively resist as a form of protest.

There is another ambiguity in the idea that "kids do more if they like you." What do we mean, exactly, by "do more"? Do we mean that students will be more attentive in class? that they will put in extra time out of class? that they will ask more questions? that they will think more deeply? that their work will be of a higher quality? Are all of these outcomes equally tied to students' liking of their teacher? And is "doing more" always positive, or might it sometimes entail compliance with a set of behavioral expectations that do not, in the long run, serve the student well?

To be clear, I don't think anybody would suggest that it is undesirable for students to like their teachers. But the ambiguities I've just mentioned do point to some of the limitations and pitfalls of the notion that students do more for teachers they like. I want to spend just a little time discussing what might be the largest pitfall of all: the understandable—maybe even unavoidable—tendency of teachers to seek their students' affection or approval.

It is unsurprising that teachers would look to their students for personal and professional validation. Herb Kohl notes that "almost every teacher is aware of being observed and judged by students."[3] The first years of teaching tend to be "particularly self-conscious times," marked by "the specter of student revolt, or of personal failure to reach students." Kohl tells the story of Joan, a new third-grade teacher who came to him distraught that her students "didn't seem to like her, which made her feel that she was either too permissive or too stern." After hearing Joan talk for a while about how her efforts to earn the favor of her students had backfired, Kohl asked her to describe her students one at a time—not in terms of their relationship with her, but as "people with lives independent of her and school." Kohl then diagnosed the source of Joan's frustration this way:

> Her ego, her sense of self-esteem, of success and failure, was bound up with her relationship to the students. They weren't people separate from her sense of self

at all, and this binding made it impossible to conceive of a way out of their mutual pain.

Kohl suggests that when teachers see their interactions with students as opportunities to win or test their students' affection, they may miss opportunities to learn about their students' "needs and strengths and consequently to help them use these strengths to meet their own needs." Conversely, approaching their students with genuine curiosity and concern allows teachers to "release" or "suspend" their egos, which in turn enables a more productive focus on students and their growth. In Joan's case, "by being less dependent upon and more aware of her students," she was able to grow "much closer to them and much more effective as their teacher."

Teachers' determination to get students to like them might also be problematic insofar as it leads teachers to avoid any potential conflict with students. To see why a conflict-avoidance orientation, carried too far, could shortchange students, consider the most obvious option for eliminating conflict. If conflict in the student-teacher relationship generally stems from teachers' making unwelcome demands on students' time, attention, and energies, then one way to eliminate conflict is for teachers to make fewer (or no) unwanted demands on students. Particularly at the secondary level, scholars have documented a process of "bargaining" or "treaty-making," through which teachers moderate their academic demands in exchange for a minimal level of cooperation from students.[4] A hallmark of these classroom accords, according to scholars, is that teachers agree to accept mediocre academic work from students—i.e. work that can be accomplished with a minimum of effort (and learning).

It's worth noting that not all accommodations students and teachers reach together are necessarily bad. In principle, the practice of negotiating a mutually acceptable set of goals, activities, and classroom norms—within reasonable institutional constraints— could signal precisely the sort of dynamic, sensitive, student-teacher relationship we hope to foster. Indeed, some of the demands and expectations teachers might remove or relax as part of the "treaty-making" process may have been misconceived and harmful to students. The worry here, though, is that teachers' negotiating stance will be unduly influenced by their (well-intentioned) effort to be liked, with the result that many students will be allowed to fall short of their potential.

Jeff Duncan-Andrade, among others, suggests that this problem is particularly pervasive in schools serving poor and non-white students. In a 2007 case study, he quotes a teacher from one such school, who reported that

> many [other teachers at the school] are so afraid that students won't like them if they discipline them that they end up letting students do things they would never permit from their own children. They lower their standards and will take any old excuse from students for why they did not do their homework, or why they did not sit still in class or do their work.[5]

Duncan-Andrade argues that "highly effective urban educators" avoid this trap in part by "understanding the distinction between being liked and being loved by their students." The difference, he explains, is that "the people that we love can demand levels of commitment from us that defy even our own notions of what we are capable of," whereas "people that we like, but do not love, typically are not able to push the limits of our abilities."

Duncan-Andrade clarifies, however, that in the cases of the teachers he studied, "the move from being liked to being loved did not happen because of the demands they made of students." Rather, "it happened because of the love and support that accompanied those raised expectations." He goes on to catalog the many forms of "personal support" these teachers offered students: "after-school and weekend tutoring, countless meals, rides home, phone/text messaging/email/instant messaging sessions, and endless prodding, cajoling, and all around positive harassment." According to Duncan-Andrade, students must come to see such support as evidence that "everybody needs help along the way. And when that help is from someone that loves you, in spite of your shortcomings, you learn to trust that person." This "trust," in turn, makes it possible for a "loved" teacher to challenge students—and withstand occasional conflict with them—without damaging the relationship. Duncan-Andrade invokes "the approach successful parents take with their children" as a kind of model for the "loving" student-teacher relationship he has in mind.

Duncan-Andrade thus moves us beyond the conception of good student-teacher relationships as ones in which the student's emotional response can be summarized as "liking" the teacher. It also moves us beyond conceptions of the value of student-teacher relationships that focus on students' motivation—getting them to "do more." Instead, it

points toward conceptions, like those explored in the next section, that focus on students' access to the resources for learning that relationships with teachers can provide.

2. Everybody needs a reliable source of personal support to learn.

A few of the educators I spoke with at MEC and Eagle Rock told me that having a relationship with their students meant "being there" for them: offering extra help on assignments, responding to after-hours texts, lending a sympathetic ear. We sometimes laud teachers who provide this level of support for going above and beyond the requirements of their job. Yet many learning theorists view these kinds of personal support—and the relationships that reliably afford them—as essential to learning.

Some of the most powerful illustrations of the role supportive relationships play in learning come from theories of infant and early childhood development. In particular, a developmental perspective known as Attachment Theory has been widely influential in defining what it means for a relationship to support learning. Attachment theorists focus on the short- and long-term consequences of the bonds children form with their earliest caregivers. One of the key tenets of Attachment Theory is captured in the concept of a "secure base." As a recent article explains,

> an important aspect of support-giving involves providing a base from which an attached person can make excursions into the world (to play, work, learn, discover, create) knowing that he/she can return for comfort, reassurance, or assistance should he/she encounter difficulties along the way.[6]

Thus, from an early age, our ability to learn through exploration of the environment is a function of how "securely attached" we are to a consistent source of support.

Attachment theorists have traditionally focused on three dimensions of a caregiver-child relationship in assessing the degree to which it is secure: emotional closeness, conflict, and dependency.[7] It is important to note that these dimensions are generally presumed to vary independently of one another. Thus, for instance, a relationship can be high in both conflict and closeness, even though we often think of close relationships as harmonious. Similarly, a relationship can be high in dependency but low in closeness, even though we might tend to imagine highly dependent children as

close to their caregivers. This does not imply, however, that these dimensions are entirely unrelated. It is possible that closeness confers some protection against conflict, that some degree of conflict is inherent in close relationships, that excessive closeness breeds dependency, and so on. In any case, attachment theorists have used these dimensions to sketch a profile of secure child-parent relationships. There seems to be a stable consensus that relationships exhibiting high closeness, low conflict, and moderate dependence are most supportive of the child's development.

Heather Davis observes that "researchers working from an attachment perspective conceptualize teacher-child relationships as extensions of the parent-child relationship."[8] In particular, they borrow the dimensions used to study child-parent attachment to study student-teacher relationships. According to Davis, researchers have found that the same characteristics that indicate secure child-parent relationships—high closeness, low conflict, moderate dependence—"also appear to predict the quality of early child-teacher relationships."[9] She speculates that "this may be because parent-child and early teacher-child relationships share similar objectives: to encourage intellectual exploration in young children and to develop social competence with adults and peers." Noting that objectives start to shift in later elementary school to focus on mastery of specific cognitive skills, Davis wonders how well the dimensions of closeness, conflict, and dependency describe "the nature of teacher-student relationships throughout development."

Attachment perspectives also provide a powerful illustration of the importance of situating the student-teacher relationship within the broader social ecology of the developing person. As Davis explains,

> central to attachment perspectives on student-teacher relationships is the belief that students bring to the classroom relational schemas, or models, about the nature of social relationships and their social world. These models are believed to influence the quality of future relationships (e.g., with teachers) by shaping students' interpretations of teacher initiations and responses in interactions.[10]

Thus, for instance, children who are "securely attached" to their parents may be more likely to view their earliest teachers as sources of instrumental and emotional support.[11] Likewise, children who experience their earliest teachers as reliable sources of support may be more likely to expect—and elicit—similar support from subsequent teachers.[12]

We can understand attachment perspectives as one branch of a larger family of theories that foreground the role that social support plays in learning. Like attachment theorists, learning theorists in the social constructivist tradition cast social relationships as "developmental resources."[13] Perhaps the most famous contribution to this intellectual tradition is Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD. Vygotsky has become required reading in schools of education, and the ZPD has become a watchword of modern instructional practice. Explaining the concept of the ZPD will, I think, help clarify what social constructivists mean when they say that all learning is social—and what the implications might be for student-teacher relationships.

The basic idea of the ZPD is that at any given time, there are things we can do with the help of more knowledgeable others that we cannot do by ourselves. Think of a particular moment in the development of a child who is learning to read. At that moment, there may be books the child can "read," but only with various forms of assistance. The child may need a steady stream of hints, cues, reminders, and encouragement to help decode words (e.g. "Remember *p-h* makes an *f* sound" or "Sound it out" or "You saw that word on the sign by the playground" or "You've almost got it!"). Similarly, to comprehend the text, the child may need explanations of what particular words mean or contextual information that the author presumed readers would know. Thus, a book that the child could never get through—much less comprehend—alone could well be understood and enjoyed by that same child in a parent's or teacher's lap. Such a book is said to be within the child's ZPD.

According to Vygotsky, this is how we learn: we perform at the limits of our ZPD, drawing on the support of the people in our social environment (parents, teachers, peers, etc.) to tackle challenges that we could never have conquered by ourselves. In the process, we construct new understandings and competencies. Thus, as we move through our ZPD, the ZPD itself moves; the kind of book that we needed so much help reading last year we could now easily handle on our own.

A scholar named Robert Pianta has built a whole program of research around understanding student-teacher relationships from within this perspective on learning. Pianta begins with the classic social constructivist premise that "children are only as competent as their context affords them the opportunity be."[14] He thus conceptualizes

children's relationships with teachers as sources of support students can draw on in performing social and cognitive tasks at the limits of their ZPD.[15] For Pianta, a functional student-teacher relationship is characterized by a "pattern of interaction" that affords students access to the cues, hints, feedback, encouragement, and reassurance they need to develop new competencies.

Pianta's primary audience is school psychologists, and much of his work examines psychologist-led interventions designed to help teachers understand and improve their relationships with students. Perhaps because his work is situated in early elementary classrooms, where "teachers may assume a parent-surrogate role," the categories Pianta uses to assess student-teacher relationships are heavily influenced by attachment theory. Thus, for instance, he is concerned with the ways in which a "dependent," "angry," or "uninvolved" relationship with a teacher can constrain a student's access to the developmental resources that the teacher could otherwise provide.[16] He points out that a negative pattern of interaction can erode both the student's capacity to seek and receive guidance and the teacher's inclination to provide it.

The interventions Pianta researches typically target student-teacher "dyads," meaning relationships between one student and one teacher. However, recognizing that these dyads are embedded within the larger social system of the classroom—and that dyadic relationships tend to be shaped by teachers' interactions with *groups* of students— Pianta suggests that there is "a clear role" for school psychologists and counselors to try to shape classroom-level practices.[17] Nonetheless, many of the practices he recommends are designed to make the most of teachers' limited one-on-one time with students.

By way of illustration, let me describe one intervention, called Banking Time, that Pianta has studied extensively.[18] The intervention offers an opportunity for students and teachers locked in a pattern of negative interactions to interact on different terms outside the normal classroom context and thereby reset their relationship. Banking Time sessions are scheduled for a regular time each day; they are never scheduled or withheld in response to the student's behavior or academic performance. These sessions differ from typical classroom interactions in that the child decides how to use the time, and the teacher "follows the child's lead." The teacher is instructed to "refrain from any teaching, directing, selective attending, or reinforcement." The teacher may, however,

convey messages that "disconfirm the child's expectations of or beliefs about the teacher" and thus help the student "redefine" the relationship. In particular, Pianta suggests that "messages involving the teacher as a helper, a person who is unconditionally available and predictable, a source of safety and comfort, and a resource for problem solving" are generally appropriate, though "these messages can be tailored" to the particular circumstances of the relationship.

Banking Time is supposed to produce better outcomes in the classroom primarily by "making the adult's resources available to the child." Pianta notes that student-teacher relationships are often shaped by teachers' reactions to students' misbehavior and that these reactions often involve expressions of anger, annoyance, or emotional distance. Over time, this pattern of interaction can lead the student and teacher to develop "uniformly negative perceptions" of one another. As a result,

> emotions tend to be negative and engagement is around negative experiences or is absent altogether. These relationship systems have lost the flexibility they need to respond to the challenges produced by classroom demands. In so doing, the adult's resources are not available to the child, and the child is likely to display less and less competence over time…

Banking Time allows students and teachers to practice responding to one another in less reactive ways, under circumstances designed to showcase some of the student's hidden competencies and the teacher's capacity to develop those competencies further at the student's request. These positive interactions disrupt settled patterns, changing both habits and perceptions. The relationship that emerges can then be "banked" as a resource for coping with moments of stress or challenge in the classroom. Having experienced some success in helping the child, the teacher may be more likely to offer positive support; and having experienced the teacher as helpful, the student may be more likely to seek and accept such support when offered.

While Banking Time was designed as an intervention for "troubled" student-teacher dyads, Pianta recommends that teachers adopt a version of the practice as a classroom routine in order to maintain positive relationships with all students.[19] He observes that "although many children receive individual attention as a reward for positive behavior, it is not usually the case that time is built into the day so that each child is attended to by an adult in an unconditional manner." Because such unconditional

attention is so important to relationship-building, he suggests that teachers make a point of spending "small snippets of time" with each student daily in a "nondirective, reflective stance." In fact, he suggests that teachers dedicate "regularly scheduled time blocks" to such interactions, perhaps during recess, lunch, group work, or independent work. Pianta acknowledges the challenge of finding and organizing the time for non-directive interactions during a busy school-day. But he insists on the crucial importance of setting aside such time to convey teachers' unconditional availability as sources of support.

Notice that the Banking Time approach does not conceptualize positive student-teacher relationships as a means of motivating students to "do more" or "try harder." To the extent that relationships are seen as motivating, the idea is to motivate students to engage adults as developmental resources. And even then, the emphasis is less on motivating the student per se than on establishing patterns of interaction within which support from the teacher is routinely available.

Despite Pianta's research specialization in the early elementary years, his basic conception of the student-teacher relationship as a developmental resource seems at least arguably applicable to older children and adolescents (not to mention adults). After all, we never stop learning by moving through our ZPDs. Just as we needed someone to help us through our first picture books when we're young children, we need someone to help us through James Joyce when we're older. If we do not relate to our teachers as sources of support for tackling emotional and intellectual challenges at the limits of our current ability, then we may be unable to learn from them—at any age. Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that versions of the Banking Time intervention show up in secondary schools in the form of "advisory" programs (or other programs that position teachers as youth advocates or mentors).[20] More broadly, the concept of "teacher support" comes up again and again in the literature on student-teacher relationships in secondary schools.[21] One important task of that literature is to define what it means for student-teacher relationships in middle or high school to be supportive. Does it mean, for instance, being available to students—like the teachers at MEC and Eagle Rock—in ways that teachers traditionally haven't?

Some of the literature on teacher supportiveness draws a distinction that I have mostly glossed over. In conceptualizing student-teacher relationships as "developmental

resources," we might think of teachers as providing two distinct forms of support. What some scholars call "academic" (or "instrumental") support refers to help in meeting the cognitive challenges presented by schoolwork; obvious examples include clear explanations of complex subject matter, extensive and timely feedback on assignments, and advice on productive study habits.[22] In contrast, what we might call emotional (or "socio-emotional") support refers to efforts by teachers to help students achieve a sense of wellbeing; these efforts might include assistance in coping with challenges students face in their personal lives, in and out of school. In the next section, we consider some of the ways in which "emotional" and "academic" support might interact.

3. Students can learn only once their emotional needs have been met.

The same MEC advisor who explained that "kids do more for you if they like you" quickly added this reflection on the importance of the school's commitment to relationships: "If a student likes coming to school, if they're comfortable being in school... if they just like the sense of walking in the front doors, and they feel like it's a friendly place," that feeling "goes a really long way in getting students to engage academically." He didn't specify (and I didn't ask) exactly how students' emotional comfort in school "goes a really long way" toward academic engagement. But much of the research on student-teacher relationships connects those dots by positing "belonging," "relatedness," or "connectedness" as a fundamental human need that must be satisfied before people can learn.[23]

For example, consider the rationale offered by Vichet Chhuon and Tanner LeBaron Wallace for their 2014 focus group study of adolescents' experience of "being known" in school. They begin by arguing that

> a school may be thought of as a relational community that offers opportunities for students to fulfill the need to belong. Sense of belonging within the school community is actualized through the reciprocal relationships between the students and others within the school. Thus, in educational contexts, belonging is often defined as the extent to which a student feels "personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially by teachers and other adults in the school social environment."[24]

According to Chhuon and Wallace, understanding the patterns of student-teacher interaction that "fulfill adolescents' need for belonging" is critical because "motivation theorists contend that fostering academic engagement, in part, requires that the need for relatedness in the educational context is met."[25]

This reasoning is entirely consistent with the conception we've been exploring of student-teacher relationships as developmental resources. We could frame the argument, in social constructivist terms, as follows: students cannot (or will not) access the developmental resources available in a social environment if they do not feel that they "belong" in that environment. But the language of "fundamental needs"—and the sense that our needs are arranged hierarchically, with emotional needs coming first—adds a different dimension to the conversation. Framing the value of student-teacher relationships in terms of the fulfillment of students' emotional or "affective" needs introduces a whole new set of questions and hypotheses to explore.

For one thing, it brings into play a set of theories suggesting that fulfilling students' need for relatedness is especially important for those who are "at risk" of poor academic performance—a group that is supposed to consist disproportionately of boys, adolescents, low-income students, and racial or ethnic minorities. According to what has been termed the "academic risk perspective," students who for whatever reason are less likely to experience success in school—as a result, for example, of stressors, lack of resources, or a mismatch between their needs and the typical school environment—"have more to gain or lose than other students" from affective relationships with teachers.[26] That is, "at risk" students' academic engagement and achievement are thought to be more dependent than others' on their teachers' ability to satisfy their emotional needs.

Statistical research attempting to confirm this hypothesis with respect to different groups has yielded mixed results.[27] But it is interesting to consider the various theories behind the academic risk perspective in greater depth. These theories, after all, could help illuminate the hypothesized mechanisms linking teachers' attention to students' affective needs with students' opportunities to learn.

Unfortunately, the premises of the academic risk perspective are not always well-specified. The theory with respect to gender, in particular, is not especially clear. Boys are presumed to bond less often and easily with their teachers than girls do, but when

such bonds do form, the idea is that they will set into motion "protective forces" that mitigate whatever factors account for boys' higher risk of academic problems. Even after reviewing some of the studies testing this hypothesis, I am still not entirely sure what those factors are, or how exactly they are mitigated by emotional bonds with teachers. It is easy enough to think up some possibilities, though. For instance, if boys are more likely to require socialization to the kind of norms that characterize classroom life—and less likely to receive that socialization through out-of-school relationships—then affective relationships with teachers might be especially important for boys.[28]

With respect to age, the theory is that students' risk of academic disengagement grows as they grow older in part because the school environment becomes increasingly impersonal and anonymous, especially in the transition from elementary to secondary school. As the overall social environment becomes more impersonal, interactions with those rare teachers who meet adolescents' need for relatedness become more significant and impactful. One of the key insights of this perspective is that—contrary to stereotype—teenagers' burgeoning need for autonomy does not imply a need for emotional distance from adults. On the contrary, adolescents' sense of autonomy appears to be correlated with their sense of closeness with adults, suggesting that the affective quality of student-teacher relationships might become more, not less, important for students as they grow older and their need for autonomy increases.[29]

Perhaps the best-known example of the academic risk perspective is the theory that emotionally supportive relationships with teachers are especially important for members of nondominant social and economic groups. There are different versions of this theory, addressing different sources of risk. One version suggests that students from non-dominant groups lack access to forms of social capital (e.g., knowledge of how to work the system, comfort with linguistic and cultural conventions) that facilitate learning in a typical school environment. If, as some scholars suppose, these forms of social capital "flow through affective bonds with teachers," then we might suppose those bonds to be most important for students who have least access to such capital.[30]

Another take on the academic risk hypothesis emphasizes that relationships with teachers can protect students against the effects of chronic stressors associated with lower socio-economic status. These stressors might stem from a wide variety of (often co-

occurring) conditions, including food insecurity, lack of adequate health care, homelessness, the absence of caregivers, or interaction with chronically stressed or anxious caregivers. According to one recent summary, neurological imaging shows that learning "can be shut down by fear and anxiety, whether they are aroused by immediate events or have their source in childhood trauma, regardless of whether the fear or anxiety is present in awareness."[31] Scientists at Harvard's Center for the Developing Child have identified a phenomenon they call toxic stress response, "which can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity... without adequate adult support."[32] In these cases, the body remains in a constant state of high alert, flooded with stress hormones like cortisol. This "prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years." If, as the Harvard research suggests, participation in "responsive relationships with caring adults" mitigates the body's stress response, it could follow that strong affective bonds with teachers are especially critical to the success of students who come from social backgrounds that make them more vulnerable to stress.[33]

A variant of this theory highlights stressors related in particular to the daily experience of living as a member of a nondominant racial group. That experience may include routine encounters with subtle expressions of (often unconscious) racism—now widely known as micro-aggressions—which make it harder for students to feel like they belong in the dominant culture or its institutions (like school). Similarly, students' perception of negative stereotypes about their group's abilities may trigger a stress response, interfering with their academic motivation and performance.[34] Thus, students' very awareness of inhabiting a social identity marked as "at risk" may rob them of the sense of wellbeing they need to thrive in (and out) of school—and makes relationships that attend to their need for belonging all the more important.

Duncan-Andrade argues that under these conditions, attending to students' need for belonging means something very specific: acknowledging, affirming, and empathizing with students' feelings of alienation from or rejection by the dominant culture.[35] He insists that in the face of the material and social realities these students contend with, educators must offer more than "hokey hope"—pat assurances that success

is attainable for urban youth who "just work hard, pay attention, and play by the rules." He condemns such assurances for ignoring and delegitimizing the pain these students may bring to the classroom, ultimately deepening their sense of isolation and despair when the path to success turns out not to be so easy. Caring for these students, he suggests, means conveying sincere solidarity—a willingness to share in students' suffering and sacrifice, to help them process their pain and perceptions of injustice, to recognize and celebrate their resilience. According to Duncan-Andrade, it is through "deep and caring" relationships of this kind that teachers cultivate the "true hope" necessary for students to grow under radically inhospitable conditions.

There is a delicate balance being struck here. Duncan-Andrade wants to acknowledge the unique needs of students from nondominant groups while at the same time challenging stereotypes that portray these students and their social backgrounds as somehow deficient. Likewise, Gloria Ladson-Billings developed the concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as an alternative to paradigms that either ignore African American children's distinctive "social or cultural needs" or aim to "re-socialize African American students to mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes."[36] The hallmark of teachers practicing CRP, she explains, is that they "attempt to capitalize on students' individual, group, and cultural differences." According to Ladson-Billings, this orientation has several implications for the structure of social relations in the classroom, and especially for the student-teacher relationship.[37] Among other things, she suggests that CRP requires teachers to regularly trade roles with students, listening (and learning) while students talk (and teach); it requires teachers to redefine success not as outcompeting others but as helping everyone in the "classroom family" succeed; it requires teachers to know as much as they can about students' life outside of school; and it requires teachers to cultivate relationships that extend "beyond the boundaries of the classroom" or schoolwork.

Ladson-Billings describes the case of Patricia Hilliard as an example of a teacher whose relationship with students reflects CRP. Once a week, Hilliard invites a group of four or five students to join her for lunch. The students receive special permission to bring their food from the cafeteria to Hilliard's classroom, where

they find that Hilliard has prepared a table with place mats and napkins. The students sit and chat with Hilliard as they eat lunch. The thirty to forty minutes are spent talking about the students' and Hilliard's lives and interests. There is almost no talk about school or school work. They become a group of friends having lunch together.[38]

Hilliard explains that "the 'lunch bunch' thing" serves several purposes, chief among them "as a way to get to know the students. The pace of the classroom is so frantic that you hardly have time to get to know them as people." Ladson-Billings does seem to portray this sort of practice as particularly important for teachers of African American children. But she does not frame Hilliard's affective relationships with students as a way of compensating for the supposed deficiencies in the social backgrounds of students who are deemed "at risk." On the contrary, she sees this focus on caring for students "as people" as part of a larger commitment to valuing, leveraging, and participating in the distinctive cultural practices, traditions, and identities of their students.

In emphasizing the importance of teachers' appreciation of the assets for learning embedded in nondominant cultures and communities, CRP and related pedagogies raise some thorny questions about the role that teachers' identity or demography might play in their attempts to meet students' affective needs. Put bluntly, the question that sometimes emerges in this context, either implicitly or explicitly, is whether white teachers from affluent communities might struggle to relate to students from other social and racial backgrounds. Conversely, one conclusion that is sometimes drawn from the CRP literature is that it is easier for teachers to fulfill students' need for belongingness in school when they share in those students' social identity.

That idea animates a number of ongoing initiatives to diversify the American teaching force. A recent article in *The Atlantic*, for example, profiled a set of teacher preparation and professional development programs that aim specifically to boost the number of black male teachers.[39] The article reported that "nationally, 16 percent of public school students are black, but the proportion of black teachers is less than half of that." African-American men are particularly under-represented, making up "roughly 2 percent of the nation's teaching force." The article cites one report finding that "40 percent of public schools lack even a single minority teacher and, even in urban areas, teaching staffs are predominantly white."[40] It also cites one "large-scale analysis of the

impact of a teacher's race on student performance" that concluded that "black children randomly placed with black teachers showed more improvement than black children taught by white teachers."[41]

One theory invoked to explain that finding is that "black teachers are more likely to believe in black students' ability to succeed."[42] An additional, perhaps related, premise is that teachers who share a social identity with their students are more likely to create a school environment in which students feel like they belong. "For years," *The Atlantic* reports,

> researchers have pointed out that black teachers teaching black children create bonds that resemble family connections and support. While it's evident that white teachers are also capable of nurturing students, teachers who are ethnically similar to their students are more likely to live in the same neighborhoods and share common experiences.[43]

Arguments of this sort sometimes emphasize the emotional and motivational benefits to students of learning from teachers whose experiences are similar enough to their own to serve as effective "role models." But they also suggest that teachers who identify with their students may be more committed to providing the forms of socio-emotional care that students from nondominant social backgrounds need.

A version of that theory was advanced in a 2002 essay by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, who wrote that it is "more than coincidence" that so many of the effective teachers of African-American children portrayed in the CRP literature are African-American women. She argued that many of these women consciously or unconsciously identify with a tradition of black feminism called "womanism," which "seeks to elucidate the experiences, thoughts, and behaviors of black women."[44] According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, womanist teachers adopt a "maternal" attitude toward their students, choosing to relate to them as they would their own children and using "the familiar and familial mother-child relationships as a guide for their interactions with students."[45] Moreover, she claims that womanists' personal sensitivity to the "convergence of racism, sexism, and classism" heightens their sensitivity to the stereotypes and discrimination to which their students might be subject. In turn, this "political clarity" sharpens their sense of responsibility for recognizing and bringing out the best in their students, so as to nurture their power, self-respect, and hopefulness in the face of an unjust social environment.

Like Duncan-Andrade, Beauboeuf-Lafontant views explicit expressions of solidarity with nonwhite students' sense of vulnerability within the social order as essential to what it means to care for these students.

Although Beauboeuf-Lafontant concludes her essay by suggesting that people of any gender or ethnic background can "choose whether or not to become womanists," she also suggests at times that white teachers are prone to harboring the negative perceptions of nonwhite students that womanism is meant to dismantle. Specifically, she invokes a common criticism of white (often female) teachers for believing that they need to "save" their students from deficits in their homes, communities, and cultures. Suspicion of such teachers is a familiar theme within the academic literature on teaching for social justice. Gregory Michie, for example, claims that "buying into the myth of the White savior has sunk many novice urban teachers, even as it is perpetuated in popular films and books about teaching."[46]

Interestingly, it is precisely in adopting an identity as a surrogate caregiver—in striving to cultivate a sense of belonging in the classroom "family"—that white teachers may become vulnerable to the charge of stereotyping and patronizing their nonwhite students. As we've seen, a common worry is that (white) teachers' attention to the distinctive emotional needs of "at risk" youth might carry with it "low expectations" for what those young people can accomplish academically.[47] Meredith Phillips captures this suspicion succinctly when she speculates that a potentially oppressive "liberal paternalism motivates educators' focus on students' social and emotional needs."[48] But as Beauboeuf-Lafontant shows, that concern coexists in the CRP literature with images of (typically nonwhite) teachers who unite an explicitly "maternal" or "familial" attitude toward their students with "demanding" academic expectations. Putting all these images together, we are left with the suggestion that teachers who share a social identity with their students are uniquely positioned to combine consistent care for their affective needs with consistent academic challenge.[49]

Whatever the implications of that suggestion may be, my own hope is that it allows ample room for optimism about the possibilities of teaching—and relating—across social and cultural difference. There are many models and stories we might draw on in generating such optimism, some of which sit more or less comfortably within CRP

scholarship[50] and some of which (like the story portrayed in *Freedom Writers*) have drawn criticism, fairly or unfairly, for perpetuating "the myth of the White savior." Unfortunately, there isn't space here to examine any of these models in the depth they deserve. Instead, I'll just conclude our detour into the thicket of questions about teacher identity with this basic observation: once we start talking about students' experience of "community" or "belonging" as a precondition to learning, consideration of students' and teachers' social identities becomes both inevitable and salient.

It is important to note, however, that some critics attack the idea of prioritizing students' emotional wellbeing at its root. Kathryn Ecclestone, for one, has led the charge against what is sometimes called the "therapeutic turn" in education.[51] Ecclestone argues that the problem with elevating emotional wellbeing to a "prominent educational goal" is that it leads masses of students to internalize "diminished" images of themselves as fragile, unsafe, damaged, and in need of state-sponsored therapeutic intervention.[52] Ecclestone singles out the very premise we've been considering—that students must have their emotional needs attended to before they can learn—as diminishing students' sense of themselves as resilient, capable, independent learners.

Ecclestone's critique shares with CRP a suspicion of claims that students from nondominant groups require more emotional support from teachers to compensate for deficits in their home and community contexts. Like some CRP scholars, she especially worries that the prioritization of emotional needs could contribute to "the erosion of universal educational goals rooted in high aspirations and optimism about human potential," leading to "very insidious forms of inequality."[53] But Ecclestone also challenges the view (sometimes identified with CRP) that students are necessarily empowered when teachers validate their sense of social vulnerability, and she questions the rhetorical emphasis on ensuring that school is an "emotionally safe space." It's not, of course, that Ecclestone wants teachers to disregard their students' safety. Rather, she worries that trends in pedagogical theory that presuppose students' socio-emotional fragility tend to disempower students, making them feel *more* unsafe and less capable of achieving ambitious personal goals.

The idea of prioritizing students' social and emotional needs raises other issues as well. Even if we assumed that meeting students' fundamental "need to belong," for

instance, is essential to facilitating learning, conceptualizing students' needs at that level of abstraction may or may not help teachers perceive and respond to the more concrete needs of particular students at particular times. As a practical matter, we might wonder how adept teachers are at discerning, in a flexible and fluid manner, what their students really need, emotionally, from a relationship with them. The challenge is complicated not only by potential differences between students' and teachers' social identities and lived experience, but also by individual differences in students' perceptions of or receptiveness to teachers' overtures. A teacher who is perceived as "warm" or "caring" by some students because of his or her evident attention to their affective needs may for the same reason be perceived as "annoying" or "intrusive" by other students in the same class. It is easy enough to imagine personality types, relational schemas, and self-concepts that might predictably conflict with teachers' efforts to form "close," emotionally-charged bonds with students.

We might also wonder whether it is teachers' individual efforts to meet students' need to belong that we should be focused on, as opposed to the culture or norms of the school as a whole. Many of my informants at both Eagle Rock and MEC attributed students' sense of belonging to the informality of the schools' culture. In both schools, students dress informally, call their teachers by their first names, and feel comfortable using youthful idioms (including expletives) in conversation with adults. At Eagle Rock's "daily gatherings," students sit propped up against one another and against their teachers; the Head of School quipped that there are times when it can be hard to tell the students and teachers apart. Educators at both schools use terms like "home" and "family" to capture the comfort and intimacy that characterize the atmosphere of their school. But of course, "homes" and "families" are themselves characterized by many different cultures and norms, not all of which stress informality and intimacy. One question, then, is whether there is any necessary connection between maintaining an informal and intimate atmosphere and fulfilling students' need for belonging in school. It is easy enough to imagine organizations with very different cultures (e.g. military academies), to which people nonetheless experience a strong emotional connection. So is the upshot that we should allow a diverse array of school cultures to flourish, to suit the varying preferences and personalities of different students? Even so, could we be

justified in suspecting that for most contemporary American teenagers, the kind of social atmosphere I observed at Eagle Rock and MEC is most conducive to the kind of social relationships that meet their emotional needs?

These issues will resurface later, but at this point it might help to clarify exactly how fulfilling students' affective needs is supposed to motivate or facilitate learning. So far, we've only scratched the surface of theoretical frameworks that posit emotional needs like "belonging" or "relatedness" as universal, fundamental, and prerequisite to academic engagement. The next section delves more deeply into some of these frameworks, beginning with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which names relatedness, competence, and autonomy as the "innate psychological needs" that must be met to ensure "optimal functioning" of the "human tendency toward learning and creativity."[54] As we'll see, SDT is part of a family of theories that frame emotionally supportive relationships as central to the development of students' sense of agency—and agency as central to learning.

4. Relationships support students in exercising the agency and initiative on which meaningful learning depends.

Developed by psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan in the 1980s, SDT quickly became (and remains) a dominant paradigm for studying the social conditions that influence motivation in schools. As its name implies, SDT is known for the idea that social environments that meet our psychological needs give rise to "self-determined" forms of motivation. Self-determined motivation refers to the experience of our actions as our own—the feeling that we are doing something because we *want to* rather than because we *have to*. This is important because more self-determined forms of motivation are supposed to lead to better outcomes, including more engagement with schoolwork, better academic performance, and deeper learning (along with a host of other benefits).[55]

The prized, most self-determined form of motivation in the SDT framework is called *intrinsic motivation*. Ryan and Deci locate intrinsic motivation in "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to

explore, and to learn."[56] Intrinsically motivated activities are undertaken "for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself," in contrast with extrinsically motivated activities, which are performed "in order to obtain some separable outcome." Ryan and Deci favor intrinsically motivated learning behaviors because they "stem from the self"— from a person's own innate curiosity and creativity. Nonetheless, Ryan and Deci recognize that we could never hope to feel intrinsically motivated to do everything we must, for only those "activities that have the appeal of novelty, challenge, or aesthetic value" can elicit intrinsic motivation. Other activities require extrinsic motivation, even under the best of circumstances.[57]

Fortunately, though, extrinsic motivation can be self-determined too. Perhaps the greatest contribution of SDT has been to point out that not all extrinsic motivation is the same. Extrinsic motivators range along a continuum from "passive compliance" to "active personal commitment."[58] To illustrate this distinction, Ryan and Deci offer the example of a child's motivation to complete homework. At one end of the spectrum, a child might be motivated by a parent's offer of a tangible reward (e.g., "If you do your math homework, you can watch an hour of TV afterward") or by a teacher's threat (e.g., "If you miss another homework assignment, you can't go on the field trip next week"). At the other end of the spectrum is a child who has internalized the value of the assignment as a means toward achieving a personally valued goal (e.g., "If I do this homework, I will learn the math I need to fulfill my dream of becoming a marine biologist"). Note that in none of these cases is the child intrinsically motivated (i.e. eager to complete the assignment just for the fun, challenge, or beauty of the math). In each case, the homework is instrumental to some separate goal. But according to SDT, the nature of the child's extrinsic motivation matters a great deal.

The theory is that when children respond to rewards or threats, they may feel controlled, like it is somebody else who is making them act. In that case, the quality of the child's motivation, and thus the child's performance on the homework, are unlikely to exceed the minimum necessary to get the reward or avoid the punishment. On the other hand, to the extent that the child has made a personal commitment to learning math, the child feels self-directed in deciding to do the work. And because that motivation, albeit

extrinsic, is "internalized," the child is likely to put forth the effort to master the math covered by the assignment.

Despite its emphasis on "*self*-determined" motivation, SDT is fundamentally a theory about how motivation is influenced by the social environment. Notice that in our math homework example, it is impossible to describe the child's motivation without referencing other people: parents, teachers, professional communities the child aspires to join. Our motivation never springs entirely from the self; there are always other human beings who help frame and gives purpose to our actions. Ultimately, the distinction SDT draws is between motives that spring from social contexts that we experience as supportive of our own agency and motives that spring from contexts that we experience as controlling. Indeed, from this perspective, rewards and punishments are not inherently opposed to self-determined motivation; they are problematic only insofar as they are experienced as controlling rather than supportive or enabling.

This idea that non-controlling relationships produce motivations of a higher quality lies at the heart of William Glasser's proposal for what he dubbed the "Quality School."[59] Glasser was a prominent psychiatrist who suggested that in any social context—be it a school, workplace, or marriage—there are two basic ways of relating to people: *bossing* and *leading*. Bossing is coercive; its tools are *all* either rewards or punishments. Teachers have many such tools at their disposal—including the power to grade and discipline and nag—which they routinely use to try to control students. In contrast, teachers who motivate by leading "never coerce" because they accept "that you can control only your own behavior."[60] Teachers who accept that they cannot control students focus instead on satisfying students' basic needs.

Glasser postulates that "we are all driven by four psychological needs that are embedded in our genes: the need to belong, the need for power, the need for freedom, and the need for fun."[61] (Notice that the first three of these needs roughly correspond to the three basic needs posited by SDT.) Each of us constructs what Glasser calls a "quality world," consisting of all the "people, things, and beliefs that we have discovered are most satisfying to our needs." People, he notes, are the most important inhabitants of our quality world because "it is impossible to satisfy our needs without getting involved with other people."[62] Glasser argues that effective teachers place themselves and their subject-

matter within their students' quality worlds. An effective math teacher, say, is one who is able to convince students that math class is a site where they can satisfy their most basic psychological needs. Only if students believe that, he says, will they make the personal commitment necessary to produce high-quality work.

Both SDT and Glasser's Quality School proposal fit within the broad conception of student-teacher relationships as facilitating learning by meeting our fundamental psychological needs. However, these frameworks add two distinctive premises, which set their conception of the value of student-teacher relationships apart. The first premise is that the opposite of a relationship oriented toward meeting our basic needs is a controlling or coercive relationship. The second premise is that controlling relationships inhibit the kind of initiative, personal investment, and self-direction that real achievement requires. These premises do help illuminate the qualities of student-teacher relationships that facilitate learning, but they shift the emphasis onto what teachers should *avoid* doing: bossing, controlling, coercing, and generally squelching students' initiative and autonomy. It is clear enough how the social environment might inhibit students' exercise of initiative. But beyond a general sense that teachers should support students' efforts to fulfill their own needs, it is not entirely clear how student-teacher relationships can actively promote self-directed learning.

A psychologist named Carl Rogers teed up precisely that question in the 1960s, when he emerged as one of the more prominent theorists of student-teacher relationships. Rogers believed that learning is meaningful *only* when it is the product of the learner's own agency. "Anything that can be taught to another is relatively inconsequential and has little or no significant influence on behavior," he wrote. "The only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.[63] Rogers therefore laments schools' commitment to teaching the "lifeless, sterile, futile, quickly forgotten stuff which is crammed into the minds of the poor helpless individual tied into his seat by the ironclad bonds of conformity."[64] He touts instead the more "significant or experiential" learning that occurs when human beings encounter problems that have some personal relevance to them. He imagines learning communities built around the "insatiable curiosity which drives the adolescent boy to absorb everything he can see or hear or read about gasoline engines in order to improve the efficiency and speed of his

'hot rod.'" (The example is a bit retro, but we get the point.) In the schools of Rogers's dreams, students are trusted to communicate what it is they need or want to know—and to reject efforts to foist upon them knowledge they deem useless.

These are all familiar tropes from some of the more romantic critiques of conventional schooling.[65] Yet one thing sets Rogers's manifesto apart. Despite his disdain for "teaching"—despite his enthusiasm for spontaneous, uninstructed discovery—Rogers is at his most animated in describing the role of intensive interpersonal relationships in facilitating self-determined learning. "The initiation of such learning," he writes,

> rests not upon the teaching skills of the leader, not upon his scholarly knowledge of the field, not upon his curricular planning, not upon his use of audiovisual aids, not upon the programmed learning he utilizes, not upon his lectures and presentations, not upon an abundance of books, though each of these might at one time or another be utilized as an important resource. No, the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal *relationship* between the facilitator and learner.[66]

Rogers offers some evidence for this claim but admits that he "can't be coolly scientific about this" because "the issue is too urgent." His passion for "self-initiated" learning is exceeded only by his determination to show how the inquiring, discovering, creative self emerges through a particular kind of human relationship. He is adamant that promises of "better courses, better curricula, better coverage, better teaching machines" offer little hope if the nature of student-teacher relationships stays basically the same. "Only persons, acting like persons in their relationships with their students can even begin to make a dent on" what he calls "our educational dilemma." [67]

Rogers's major contribution in this area was to specify three "attitudinal qualities" that, he says, characterize the kind of relationships on which self-directed learning depends. Before we discuss those qualities, though, it may be helpful to explain how Rogers came upon them. During his early career as a clinical psychologist, Rogers developed an approach to counseling known as "client-centered" or "person-centered" therapy. His conception of "learner-centered" education, including his theory of the kind of relationship that facilitates self-directed learning, is an extrapolation from his work as a therapist. In very broad terms, the idea is that teaching, like counseling, is an interpersonal process that involves helping people make sense of their experience, so that

they can marshal their own internal resources for growth. Rogers thus hypothesized that the qualities he'd found conducive to a productive client-therapist relationships would be analogous to the qualities of a good "learner-facilitator" relationship.

The first quality is an attitude of "realness or genuineness" in the teacher or facilitator. Rogers asserts that "when the facilitator is a real person, being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a façade, he is much more likely to be effective."[68] Although the relationship is supposed to be "learner-centered," it is important for students to perceive their teachers as people with feelings, convictions, interests, affinities, talents, limitations, and personalities of their own. Thus, whereas some of the other theorists we've encountered emphasize the importance of students' being "known," Rogers emphasizes the importance of students really knowing their teachers.

Rogers could be clearer about *why* students need to know their teachers in this way, but it is possible to infer some of his reasoning from the examples he offers. He suggests that when the teacher's personal stake in the classroom is more transparent, the subject-matter, activities, physical layout, and behavioral norms that define classroom life no longer feel fixed and arbitrary; they are elements of a contingent social dynamic that students can understand, participate in, and help shape. Similarly, a teacher who expresses genuine emotion conveys to students that their feelings also have a legitimate place in the classroom—opening up lines of communication through which a more conducive learning environment can be negotiated and constructed. In other words, teachers' expressions of their agency are supposed to encourage students to assert their own agency too.

This idea of conveying to students that their feelings (and goals and preferences) are legitimate points toward the second of the three "attitudinal qualities" Rogers identifies with student-teacher relationships that promote self-directed learning. He uses the words "prizing," "acceptance," and "trust" to capture this quality, which he referred to in his earlier work on psychotherapy as an attitude of "unconditional positive regard." I think the logic here goes something like this. Learning involves exposing our ideas and experiences to the scrutiny of others. Paradoxically, this is one reason why learning must be in some sense self-directed; only we can decide how much of ourselves we are willing

to put on the line in any given context. If we fear rejection or invalidation by those from whom we might learn, we may not take the risk of sharing, and cooperatively processing, our experience of the world. Conversely, if we expect that our need for acceptance will be met by the people around us, we are more likely to open ourselves up to the process of learning with them. It follows that we are most likely to grow in social environments led by people whose regard for us feels unconditional.

Two critical questions come to mind here. First, isn't there some tension between being "real" with students and maintaining an attitude of unconditional positive regard? If teachers are determined to show students an accepting front, won't they have to fake it sometimes? And second, isn't accepting students, no matter what, an abdication of the teacher's responsibility to show students the bounds of acceptable behavior? Isn't part of a teacher's job to tell students when they are doing something that is *not* acceptable, to improve students rather than just accepting them the way they are?

The response to both of these questions is to clarify that a stance of acceptance does not mean abstaining from all expressions of criticism or judgment. By "accepting" students, I think Rogers just means *committing* to a relationship with them, come what may, rather than *conditioning* the relationship on their conformity to expectations. Under some extreme circumstances (as when the student's behavior is vicious or dangerous), maintaining such a relationship may prove impossible. But Rogers's point is that it generally is possible for teachers to be more accepting of the various frustrating, irritating, or disappointing classroom behaviors that too often lead to unnecessary expressions of disapproval and ruptures of the student-teacher relationship.   He notes that teachers who instinctively "prize" their students can

> accept the student's occasional apathy, his erratic desires to explore by-roads of knowledge, as well as his disciplined efforts to achieve major goals. He can accept personal feelings which both disturb and promote learning—rivalry with a sibling, hatred of authority, concern about personal adequacy. What we are describing is a prizing of the learner as an imperfect human being with many feelings, many potentialities.[69]

Again, accepting a student's imperfections need not mean never responding negatively to them, though it may entail developing a more understanding attitude toward some perceived shortcomings.   Above all, it means placing the relationship on a firm

foundation of appreciation for the student, so that the student doesn't feel controlled and manipulated by any negative judgments the teacher may express.

"Accepting" students would be easier, perhaps, if teachers could develop the habit of seeing students' behavior first in a non-evaluative way, from the student's point of view. Rogers calls this stance "empathic understanding," and it is the third of the three attitudinal qualities he deems essential to facilitating self-directed learning. He claims that when the teacher "has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems *to the student*, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased." This is because when the teacher responds to the student empathetically, "the reaction in the learner follows something of this pattern, 'At last someone understands how it feels and seems to *me* without wanting to analyze me or judge me. Now I can blossom and grow and learn.'"[70]

Again, we have to fill in some of the blanks in Rogers's logic. It seems obvious why students might feel gratitude and affection toward a teacher who consistently tries to understand, in a non-evaluative way, how they see the world. But it's less clear how that appreciative reaction translates into more opportunities for the student to "blossom and grow and learn." Perhaps it comes down, once more, to this idea: because learning involves making sense of our experiences with the help of other people, we are most open to learning when we are among people who can be trusted to take our experiences seriously and respond to them with interest and sensitivity. This idea is in many ways reminiscent of the social constructivist conception of relationships as "developmental resources," but Rogers's framework adds some detail on the "attitudinal qualities" that define people who are able to serve as resources for others' development.

Taken together, the three attitudinal qualities Rogers promotes point toward a distinctive conception of how interpersonal relationships support students' sense of agency and initiative as learners. What these relationships free us from is not just the various forms of overt coercion and control to which students are subject in school, but from the various fears and insecurities that inhibit our full participation in any social setting where we might learn. Rogers suggests that people who initiate and direct their own learning have a particular psychological profile: they trust the value of their own experience, they trust other people to help them understand that experience, they are

genuinely curious about other people's experience, and they do not feel threatened or anxious about the possibility that they might change. His point is that this kind of openness and confidence does not develop in a social vacuum; it is a response to other people who share themselves with us, accept us, and understand us.

From an ethical perspective, the relationships Rogers describes sound highly desirable; they describe the way I would want others to be with me, and how I would hope to be with others. Indeed, even if we were unpersuaded by Rogers's causal claim—that "significant or experiential" learning depends on relationships of these kinds—we may (or may not) still be drawn to these relationships on ethical grounds. After all, if we were persuaded that some of most powerful motivations to learn spring from relationships that stoke, rather than soothe, our insecurities, that would not be a reason to exploit the insecurities of our students. This observation suggests one move we haven't yet made in exploring the value of student-teacher relationships. Instead of conceptualizing them as instruments of some separate goal called "learning," we might promote them instead as valuable in themselves. That is the move we make in the next (and final) section.

5.   We should treat the formation of ethical interpersonal relationships as the primary purpose of schooling.

Readers familiar with the literature on student-teacher relationships will notice that the voice of Nel Noddings has been conspicuously absent from our discussion so far. Within the community of researchers who study the quality and influence of student-teacher relationships, invocations of Noddings are practically *de rigeur*. She is routinely cited for her view that schools must change to foster more "caring" relationships between young people and adults. As far as I know, nobody has provided a more thorough, interesting, or challenging analysis of what such "caring" entails and why it matters.

It is important to note that Noddings enters our conversation as an ethicist or moral philosopher. That is, she is interested fundamentally in questions about what is good for human beings and how we go about the challenge of trying to live a good life.

Her conception of care emerged as part of a larger project to describe a feminist approach to ethics that differs from the dominant (masculine) paradigms of ethical reasoning. As she explains in her 1984 book, *Caring*, "ethical argumentation has frequently proceeded as if it were governed by the logical necessity characteristic of geometry. It has concentrated on the establishment of principles and that which can be logically derived from them."[71] The goal, in other words, has been to identify an objective set of decision-rules that we can apply to justify our moral judgments. Noddings argues that a classically female perspective—one "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness"—offers a different starting point for ethical reasoning.[72]

Instead of beginning with a quest for impersonal decision-rules, a "relational" approach to ethics begins in the awareness that what we most want out of life is to be in caring relationships with others. It is this "longing for caring—to be in that special relation—that provides the motivation for us to be moral. We want to be *moral* in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring."[73] Our experience of caring relationships thus supplies the end toward which we strive, "consciously or unconsciously," when we "meet the other morally." From this perspective, the touchstone of ethical reasoning is this question: are we doing our best to create and sustain caring relationships with the people we encounter in life?

Answering such a question can never be a matter of applying a set of logically-derived principles. It requires, rather, an intimate and ultimately personal sensitivity to the particular people we are trying to care for—their needs, feelings, tendencies, fears, aspirations, and so on. What Noddings offers is not a system or method for determining the caring thing to do, but a sense of the interpersonal attitudes or stances that equip us to sustain caring relationships.

Specifically, she identifies two stances that "characterize our consciousness when we care."[74] She calls the first stance "engrossment," which she defines as a kind of fully engaged attentiveness to the other's needs. "When I care," Noddings observes, "I really hear, see or feel what the other tries to convey." The second stance, which she names "motivational displacement," involves the adoption of the other's goals and motives as one's own: "just as we consider, plan, and reflect on our own projects, we now think what we can do to help another." Noddings's conception of care as a combination of

engrossment and motivational displacement suggests that caring is the opposite of self-absorption. It isn't that we lose ourselves in the caring relation; our own projects and perspectives do not disappear or become irrelevant because we care. Yet when we care, we at least momentarily allow ourselves to become absorbed by someone else's projects and perspectives. We are, as Noddings put it, "seized by the needs of another."

Noddings points out that the one who is cared for must also contribute to the relationship—that there must be some kind of reciprocity for the caring relationship to be "complete." This doesn't mean that the relationship must be symmetrical; children, for example, typically don't care for their parents and teachers in the same way that their parents and teachers care for them. However, even in such asymmetrical relationships, the one who is cared for must somehow recognize and respond to the caring. Without this response, the longing to enter into caring relations with others remains unfulfilled. Denied the gratification of any receptive response in the one cared for, the caregiver may feel depleted, less able to care. Noddings observes that teachers often "suffer this dreadful loss of energy when their students do not respond."[75]

Applied to schooling, Noddings's ethic of care leads to a perspective on student-teacher relationships that resonates with some of the perspectives we have already considered. Like so many of the scholars we have discussed, Noddings envisions schools that empower teachers to "take care of affiliative needs."[76] Echoing the emphasis we have seen on relationships that respect students' agency, she inveighs against the "ideology of control" that requires teachers to ignore the "purposes and objectives of students" and to force upon students subject-matter they neither want nor (if we're honest) need to learn.[77] Her broad characterization of caring as the opposite of self-absorption is reminiscent of Kohl's emphasis on the "suspension of ego" in teaching. Her claim that caring means "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible" recalls Rogers's suggestion that good teachers have a "sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems *to the student*." Likewise, Rogers's emphasis on "accepting" students finds a parallel in Noddings's promotion of a pedagogical practice called "confirmation," which involves "affirming and encouraging the best in others."[78]

Despite all these echoes and parallels, I want to highlight one important way in which Noddings's perspective on the value of caring student-teacher relationships remains distinctive. So far, we have conceptualized "good" student-teacher relationships, however defined, as a means toward the end of enhancing students' academic motivation, engagement, achievement, or learning. We have assumed that the purpose of schooling is for students to achieve all the various learning objectives that comprise contemporary standards documents, and we have focused on student-teacher relationships as an instrument of that goal.

In contrast, Noddings views the formation of caring relationships as the very purpose of schooling—the end around which schools must be organized. When she commends teachers who attend to students' affective needs, it isn't (just) because she sees such attention as a precondition that must be fulfilled before students can learn math or history; it is because such attention is characteristic of a caring person and a caring community. When she commends student-teacher relationships that are non-controlling, it isn't (just) because she thinks non-controlling relationships enhance students' academic motivation; it is because non-controlling relationships are part of an ethical ideal in which we hope students will participate throughout their lives.

Nodding's contribution—often overlooked by those who cite her—was to suggest that "the primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring."[79] She argues that schools, like all social institutions, have an essentially moral function: to help human beings realize their ethical ideal. Because caring relationships are so fundamental to the good life—so definitive of what we want for ourselves and for our children—promoting caring relationships must be the school's top priority. To the extent that schools are about learning, they must be first and foremost about learning how to be in a caring relationship.

This does not mean that other outcomes of schooling, like the acquisition of particular knowledge and skills, are unimportant. Noddings is at pains to reassure readers that school "need not—because it is an educational institution and committed to fostering ethicality—abdicate its essential responsibility to train the intellect."[80] She observes that as a general matter, intellectual training can be accomplished in the context of caring relationships. The point is just to remember which takes precedence.

To suppose, for example, that attention to affective needs necessarily implies less time for arithmetic is simply a mistake. Such tasks can be accomplished simultaneously, but the one is undertaken in light of the other. We do not ask how we must treat children in order to get them to learn arithmetic but, rather, what effect each instructional move we consider has on the development of good persons. Our guiding principles for teaching arithmetic, or any other subject, are derived from our primary concern for the persons whom we teach, and methods of teaching are chosen in consonance with these derived principles. An ethic of caring guides us to ask, What effect will this have on the person I teach? What effect will it have on the caring community we are trying to build?[81]

Thus, while Noddings is quite confident that the pursuit of intellectual aims is in principle consistent with the goal of sustaining caring relationships, she wants to be clear that intellectual goals must yield, at least temporarily, "if their pursuit endangers the ethical ideal." Whenever we pursue instructional goals in ways that "put the ethical ideal at risk, we have confused our priorities dangerously."[82]

Noddings suggests that a common way in which we compromise the ethical ideal in schools is by responding with indifference or contempt to students' resistance to our instructional objectives. In such cases, we may well achieve our instructional goal—there are often ways of forcing students to learn—but only at the cost of undermining the more important goal of enhancing students' experience of and capacity to care. Sometimes, then, it might be better to find something else for the student to learn, some goal the student will pursue with a sense of purpose and joy. Noddings's point, however, is not that teachers must "retreat every time a student shows discomfort or disinterest in a topic." She admits that there may be times when she would insist that a student learn something "if he is to be credited with mastery of a particular set of topics." But even so, she says, "I would accept his attitude toward the subject, adjust my requirements in light of his interest and ability, and support his efforts nonjudgmentally. He must be aware always that for me he is more important, more valuable, than the subject."[83]

It seems fair to say that at the heart of Noddings's vision is a two-person relational model, involving one caring adult (the teacher) and one cared-for child (the student). Much of what Noddings has to say about schools as sites of caring concerns the quality of interactions within these student-teacher dyads. At the same time, Noddings does not neglect the individual child's (or teacher's) broader social ecology. She tends to refer to schools as "communities," characterized by caring relations not only between

individual teachers and individual students, but among peers, among teachers, between teachers and parents, even between students and objects. Noddings would be the first to admit that all of these relationships inform one another. Indeed, one of her key premises is that students who experience care in their relationships with teachers thereby learn to give care, both immediately (i.e., in relationship with their peers) and in the future (i.e., in adult relationships). Ultimately, Noddings wants students' interactions with teachers to mesh with a seamless web of intersecting relationships, both within and beyond the school, that embody an ethic of care. But she does identify dyadic relationships (as opposed to larger groups) as the basic unit within which people experience care. And she focuses on the student-teacher dyad as basic to the social structure of the school—a direct reflection and determinant of the school's ethos.

Perhaps it goes without saying that in Noddings's view, most schools do not treat the maintenance of caring relations as their organizing purpose. Typically, she notes, "the academic purpose of the school drives everything."[84] Even when schools nominally commit to prioritizing relationships, they do so on the theory—and condition—that students will perform better on academic assessments as a result. The very appearance of a possible decline in performance is enough to divert energies away from activities that foster caring. Noddings complains that decades of reform aimed at "academic excellence" have produced schools in which "children are too often valued only for their achievement." As a result, "they suspect that we want their success for our own purposes, to advance our own records, and too often they are right." None of this, Noddings points out, is especially conducive to the development of individuals who know how to give and receive care.

Unsurprisingly, the alternative vision Noddings offers looks very different from a typical school. In Noddings's vision, students and teachers who enjoy learning together would be able to continue the relationship beyond the bounds of the school year.[85] Instruction would not be organized around the academic disciplines, but around "centers" or "themes" of care. The goal of such instruction would be for students to gain practical experience and increased competence in caring for themselves, for intimate others, for strangers, for plants and animals, for the earth, for human-made objects, and for ideas.[86] There would be ample opportunities for students to apprentice in what we might think of

as domestic or vocational crafts (e.g. cooking, sewing, building, repair-work)—not because they have been relegated to a lower tier academic program, but because all students must learn to see competence in these kinds of crafts as an expression of care. Students would have considerable latitude to choose what they wish to learn, including the freedom to forego some elements of the college prep curriculum.[87] Examinations would not be used to sort students according to how well they mastered a topic or skill on the first try; students would simply retake examinations until they had achieved mastery of the material (or until it no longer made sense to perseverate).[88] Teachers would never sum up students' performance in a course using a single letter or number. Instead, they would engage students in an ongoing process of cooperative evaluation, which does not require the relationship-straining ritual of periodically publishing a "final" grade.[89] Even mealtimes would become an "important event" in the school day, at which "adults in the community might sit together [with students], eat, and engage in civilized conversation."[90] This brief and incomplete sketch of Noddings's alternative vision does poor justice to the thoroughness of her discussion of the issues each proposal raises. But it offers a feel for how schools might be transformed if their primary purpose were the "maintenance and enhancement of caring."

Noddings is sensitive to the charge that her proposals are "anti-intellectual," which she denies. Her position, as we've seen, is that "it is a matter of setting priorities. Intellectual development is important, but it cannot be the first priority of schools."[91] As a practical matter, Noddings doubts that prioritizing caring relationships in schools would "stunt or impede intellectual achievement."[92] After all, when we are in a caring relationship, "part of what we receive from others is a sense of their interests, including intellectual passions."[93] It is in that context that one learns how to "care" about ideas— how to be receptive to an idea to the point of being "seized" by it.[94] Moreover, we learn that "caring in *every* domain implies competence," which may well depend on mastery of academic skills. "When we care," Nodding writes, "we accept the responsibility to work continuously on our own competence so that the recipient of our care—person, animal, object, or idea—is enhanced. There is nothing mushy about caring."[95] Thus, the intellectual habits that develop in a caring community may turn out to be more "rigorous" than those that develop in a school where intellectual achievement is the main goal.

Prioritizing relationships does not mean *de*valuing subject-matter; it means *re*valuing the subject matter that actually binds us together.

These points will not satisfy everybody who worries that students at a school organized around an ethic of care will be left unprepared for the rigors of life in a highly competitive economy. Noddings's position, remember, is that even if de-prioritizing traditional academic goals did pose a risk to students' academic achievement, that risk would be worth it if it meant producing better, happier people.[96] Others might deem that risk unacceptable, especially for students whose social background puts them at a competitive disadvantage. Is it "caring," they might ask, to jeopardize students' future life chances by authorizing their teachers to de-prioritize the acquisition of skills valued by the market? However ideal a caring community might be, might the stakes be too high to gamble on the uncertain results of a school *not* driven by academic purposes? Might that gamble be a luxury that only relatively privileged families can afford?

Noddings offers at least three distinct responses to this challenge. First, she questions the assumption that the labor market values academic knowledge and skills over workers' capacity to care (and the forms of competence that implies). After all, she says, "think of all the things one could do in this society without using algebra."[97] She bids us think, moreover, of all the students who are forced to pass Algebra II but never learn it well enough to use it. Is it really plausible to think that the market will value a passing score in advanced algebra over actual competence in some other domain?

Second, Noddings argues that if it were true that mastery of a narrow set of academic skills could determine a person's lot in life, that would reflect a societal failure of caring—in particular, a failure to value the full range of human capacities and contributions. The solution, then, would not be to perpetuate the institutional priorities that created such a failure of caring in the first place. If we are anxious about students' competitiveness in an uncaring society, then all the more reason to prioritize the formation of caring people in the organization of schools.

Ultimately, though, Noddings's response to critics of her vision of schooling is to acknowledge the complexity and indeterminacy of our efforts to care. She allows that a caring parent or teacher could conclude that the particular children they care for would be better served by a more conventional school than by the alternative she suggests (or that

the risks of experimenting with an untested alternative are too high). Noddings claims to be less interested in imposing the specific pedagogical choices she would make on others than in hearing them out, affirming their impulses to care, and helping them act on those impulses in ways that are at least acceptable.[98]

Before concluding the discussion, I want to touch on a more fundamental critique of Noddings's ethical theory. A basic premise of the theory is that the ethical ideal of caring is rooted in the kind of relations we naturally seek in our most intimate, inner-most social circle. It is in that inner circle of family and close friends that we learn what it means to care; then we apply that model of caring relations, as far as it will go, to our encounters with more distant others. Noddings's reflections on the challenges of extending care beyond our inner circle are subtle and thoughtful, and she has consistently acknowledged the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of caring at a distance in the same way we care for intimates.[99] Nonetheless, she suggests that the caring relations that arise in the inner circle provide a useful template for ethical commitment generally, and in particular for the ethos of public schools.

We might balk at that suggestion. Obviously, our relationships with close family and friends play a qualitatively different role in our lives than our relationships with coworkers, classmates, acquaintances, fellow citizens, and strangers. So why would we treat the forms of care that characterize our most precious relationships as our ideal for all social relationships? Might the good life involve prioritizing caring relationships within our inner circle, while prioritizing other ends (e.g. mutual security, liberty, justice, etc.) in the organization of public institutions?

We might wonder whether it is even possible to truly prioritize caring in schools. After all, Noddings makes it abundantly clear that caring is hard and time-consuming. It requires a depth of familiarity cultivated through extensive dialogue. It requires reserves of empathy and energy that we couldn't possibly expend on everyone. And it must be sustained by some kind of reciprocity—a response that indicates that the care has been received and accepted. Given these requirements, how could we expect students to enter into caring relationships with more than a handful of cherished teachers and classmates?

And why should we want them to? Perhaps it's good enough that each student be part of his or her own circle of care. Why should that circle have to include the entire

school community? Indeed, we might say that it is a virtue of schools that they teach students how to work, play, converse, and generally exist among people who *aren't* in their inner circle. Of course we want students to empathize with everybody as best they can. Of course we want students to feel heard and understood by their teachers and classmates. But why pretend that relationships outside of the inner circle must (or can) be caring in the sense Noddings describes? Why not be content with a social environment that is good enough for achieving the school's limited instructional aims?

Related to these questions are a variety of different concerns over the blurring of boundaries between home and school, between private and public spheres. Some critics may worry, for instance, about the erosion of the family's role as the primary site of ethical formation. They may be alarmed by any philosophy of public education that assigns state-controlled institutions so much responsibility—and authority—for shaping the ethical commitments of young people. From this perspective, the idea of public employees equating or even analogizing their role to that of a child's caregivers is pretentious at best; at worst, it dangerously confuses the state's prerogatives with those of the child's parents.[100]

One possible response to this objection is to note that Noddings's conception of schools as caring communities *includes* a commitment to caring relations with the parents and other caregivers in schoolchildren's lives. Such relationships necessarily entail, at least as a starting point, an empathic stance toward the projects, goals, and feelings of students' families. The hope is that organizing schools around a pervasive ethos of care will on balance defuse rather than inflame the inevitable tensions that arise in the relationship between home and school.

Other critics, meanwhile, see a different danger in the idea of modeling relationships in schools on the kind of intimate caring we might expect to find in the home. They worry that making schools more "home-like" means privileging values like conviviality, comity, comfort, and non-confrontation. An institution that promotes the value of social harmony above all, they argue, may fail to appreciate—and cultivate—the often rough-and-tumble, discomfiting vitality of the democratic public square.[101]

Of course, we could respond by pointing out that the contentiousness characteristic of our present public discourse hardly seems essential to (or healthy for)

democracy. And we might also question the assumption that natural caring among intimates, as a model of ethical relationships, necessarily implies a total aversion to any kind of interpersonal discomfort.[102] That assumption may even be rooted in antiquated stereotypes of female-led or "domesticated" spaces as too gentle for politics. As long as we are not tied to such stereotypes, "home-like" settings may indeed supply a model for the balance of conviviality and confrontation that democracy demands.

I do not really expect to resolve the ultimate issue here: whether caring relations, as Noddings conceives them, provide a useful touchstone for ethical reasoning outside of our inner circle. But my own view is that Noddings's approach is worth a try. Perhaps we have been too hasty to assume that the supreme value we place on our closest relationships shouldn't serve in some way as a model of how we might meet the world. Perhaps the ethical ideals embodied in those close relationships really could guide us, however imperfectly, in the design of our public institutions. In schools and other institutions of public life, we routinely subordinate the value of relationships to other ends. Where, Noddings asks, has that gotten us? Perhaps a reversal of priorities—wherever, whenever, and however we can—is just what we need.

*   *   *

The premise of this chapter was that the idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships contains multitudes. There is no single theory, hypothesis, or model people are invoking when they make claims like, "You have to have a relationship first." In itself, though, that thesis is not especially interesting. More edifying is the process of playing around with the many different notions that might be associated with a focus on the primacy of student-teacher relationships. The purpose of this chapter has been to engage for a while in that kind of play.

Each of the five statements we have considered has brought into focus a distinctive configuration of premises and questions, opportunities and challenges, promises and pitfalls. Looking across the chapter, a handful of key distinctions and recurrent themes stand out (to me). We've seen that student-teacher relationships are often framed as sources of student "motivation," but that they might just as well be

framed in non-motivational terms as "developmental resources"; these framings are different without being contradictory, each one enriching our understanding of relational dynamics in the classroom. We've seen that a focus on relationships tends to entail, for better or worse, a special concern for the affective dimension of student-teacher interactions; we've also seen, however, that the affective and academic dimensions of the relationship cannot be readily disentangled. We've seen that relationships are often framed as a means toward the end of learning, but that they could be framed instead as the primary purpose of schooling; the apparent tension between those two framings raises questions about the limits of "caring" for students within the goal-structures that define modern educational institutions. We've seen that thinking through the value of student-teacher relationships means examining the role of social identity in teaching and learning, speculating about the nature of "fundamental" human needs, clarifying the meaning of "self-directed" learning, and returning to first principles of ethical reasoning. We've seen, finally, that the idea of focusing on student-teacher relationships is not immune to criticism and opposition.

Although I think we can fairly claim to have considered a variety of perspectives spanning diverse scholarly literatures, it is also true that voices from within the broad fields of psychology and philosophy have figured especially prominently in the discussion. And while I made no conscious effort to privilege such voices (or to exclude others), it is possible that my own enjoyment of psychological theories and philosophical discourse biased my research process. Certainly, had I invited a different set of interlocutors—say, historians reflecting on Carl Rogers's influence on education in the 1960s and '70s, or school-aged youth talking about their own experience—the conversation might have taken some different turns. Inevitably, we are in the midst of *a* conversation about the importance of student-teacher relationships, not *the* conversation.

Now that we have spent some time exploring the value of those relationships, I'd like to move the conversation into its next phase. I want to suppose that at some point in our discussion you began to feel persuaded that the bond between student and teacher really is so important that it ought to be a focal target of school reform efforts. In that case, you might wonder what steps could be taken to foster better student-teacher relationships, not just in a particular classroom or school, but on a systemic level. The

next chapter responds to that wondering. Whereas we have so far focused on defining good student-teacher relationships and explaining what they do, we turn now to a discussion of the larger institutional context in which they form.

Chapter Notes

[1] Cohen, 2005, p. 284.

[2] Similarly, Sidorkin (2004) presents an extended argument that student effort in schools can be understood as rational only if we see the incentives available in the school environment in social rather than individualistic terms.

[3] Kohl, 1984, p. 67. The quotations from this paragraph are all drawn from pp. 67-69.

[4] *See, e.g.*, Sedlak, 1986; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1995.

[5] Duncan-Andrade, 2007, p. 634.

[6] Feeney & Collins, 2015, p. 24.

[7] *See* discussion in Davis, 2010, pp. 209-212.

[8] *Id.*, p. 209.

[9] *Id.*, p. 211.

[10] *Id.*, p. 209 (internal citations omitted).

[11] *Id.*, pp. 209-210. Davis points out, however, that "if children do differentiate teachers as a group of adults, distinct from primary caregivers, then children who experienced insecurity in prior relationships may have a new opportunity, through teachers, to experience security" (p. 210).

[12] *Id.*, pp. 210-211.

[13] *See* Pianta, 1999.

[14] *Id.*, p. 64.

[15] *Id.*, Chapter 4 ("The Emotional Bond Between Children and Adults").

[16] *Id.*, p. 69.

[17] *Id.*, pp. 147-151.

[18] *Id.*, pp. 139-144. The quotations in the next two paragraphs are all drawn from these pages.

[19] *Id.*, pp. 164-165.

[20] *See, e.g.*, Hutchison & McCann, 2015. We will discuss these programs extensively in Chapter 2.

[21] *See, e.g.*, Chhuon & Wallace, 2014.

[22] *See, e.g.*, *id.*, pp. 390-392.

[23] *See, e.g.*, Osterman, 2000.

[24] Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, pp. 381-382 (citing Goodenow, 1993, and quoting Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 61).

[25] Chhuon & Wallace, 2014, p. 396 (citing Ryan & Deci, 2000).

[26] *See, e.g.*, Roorda et al., 2011. They attribute the "academic risk perspective" to Hamre & Pianta, 2001.

[27] Roorda et al., 2011, pp. 497-498.

[28] Interestingly, the academic risk perspective competes with an opposite hypothesis about the differential impact of affective student-teacher relationships on boys and girls. According to a hypothesis known as the "gender role socialization" perspective, girls expect (and are expected) to feel closer to other people; thus, the theory predicts that they will be more sensitive than boys to the affective quality of their relationships with teachers (*id.*, citing Maccoby, 1998; Ewing & Taylor, 2009)

[29] *See* discussion in Davis, 2010, pp. 216, 221-223.

[30] *See* Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004, p. 62 ("The more abundant instrumental social capital that flows through affective bonds with teachers may make more of a difference in the lives of African- and Hispanic American students than of whites, for whom such capital is more often redundant.")

[31] Neville, 2015, p. 20 (citing Given, 2002).

[32] Center on the Developing Child, "Toxic stress."

[33] Center on the Developing Child, "Serve and return."

[34] *See, e.g.*, Steele, 2011.

[35] Duncan-Andrade, 2009.

[36] Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 10. A close relative of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, known as Culturally Responsive Teaching, is identified with Geneva Gay (2010). Both frameworks are sometimes united under the umbrella of "resource pedagogies" (*see*, *e.g.*, Paris, 2012).

[37] *Id.*, Chapter 4 ("We are Family").

[38] *Id.*, pp. 65-66.

[39] Reckdahl, 2015.

[40] *Id.*, citing Bireda and Chait, 2011.

[41] Reckdahl, 2015, citing Dee, 2004.

[42] Reckdahl, 2015, citing Gershenson, 2015.

[43] Reckdahl, 2015.

[44] Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72.

[45] *Id.* p. 74.

[46] Michie, 2007, p. 8.

[47] *See, e.g.*, Massey, Scott, & Dornbusch, 1975; Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006.

[48] Phillips, 1997, pp. 656-657, citing Massey, Scott, & Dornbusch, 1975.

[49] Franita Ware (2006) popularized the phrase "warm demander" to refer to this aspect of the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy. *See also* Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus (2006), who use the term "critical care" to capture "the ways in which communities of color may care about and educate their own and their intentions in doing so" (p. 413). One element of "critical care" is what they call "hard caring—a form of caring characterized by supportive instrumental relationships and high academic expectations."

[50] I have in mind, for example, the accounts of teacher learning in *Funds of Knowledge*, by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2006). *See also* Metro-Roland, 2010.

[51] *See* Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009.

[52] Ecclestone, 2007.

[53] *Id.*, p. 467.

[54] Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68.

[55] *Id.*, p. 73.

[56] *Id.*, p. 70.

[57] *Id.*, p. 71.

[58] *Id.*, pp.

[59] *See* Glasser, 1997; Glasser, 1990. Although he started using the label "Quality School" as shorthand for his proposals around 1990, Glasser began developing the ideas discussed here as early as 1969, with the publication of *Schools Without Failure.*

[60] Glasser, 1997, p. 599.

[61] *Id.*

[62] *Id.*

[63] Rogers, 1969, p. 153.

[64] *Id.*, p. 3. The quotations in this paragraph are all drawn from pp. 3-5.

[65] *See* Cohen, 1988.

[66] *Id.*, pp. 105-106.

[67] *Id.*, p. 125.

[68] *Id.* p. 106.

[69] *Id.* p. 109.

[70] *Id.* pp. 111-112.

[71] Noddings, 1984, p. 1.

[72] *Id.*, p. 2.

[73] *Id.*, p. 5.

[74] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 16. The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from pp. 15-16.

[75] *Id.*, p. 17.

[76] *Id.*, p. 174.

[77] *See, e.g.*, *id.*, p. 157-158.

[78] *Id.*, p. 25, citing the philosopher Martin Buber.

[79] Noddings, 1984, p. 172.

[80] *Id.*, p. 173.

[81] Noddings, 1986, p. 499.

[82] Noddings, 1984, p. 173.

[83] *Id.*, p. 174.

[84] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 13. The observations in this paragraph are all drawn from *id.*, pp. 11-13.

[85] *Id.*, p. 68.

[86] *Id.*, pp. 47-62.

[87] *See id.* pp. 40-42.

[88] *See* Noddings, 1986, p. 500.

[89] Noddings, 1984, pp. 193-196.

[90] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 65.

[91] *Id.*, p. 10.

[92] *Id.*, p. 12.

[93] *Id.*, p. 19.

[94] *See* Noddings, 1984, pp. 166-169.

[95] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 175.

[96] *See*, e.g., *id.*, p. 12. ("I, too, believe that a dedication to full human growth—and we will have to define this—will not stunt or impede intellectual achievement, but even if it might, I would take the risk if I could produce people who would live nonviolently with each other, sensitively and in harmony with the natural environment, reflectively and serenely with themselves.")

[97] *Id.*, p. 151.

[98] *See, e.g., id.*, *xvii*.

[99] *See, e.g., id.*, Chapter 8 ("Caring for Strangers and Distant Others").

[100] *See, e.g.,* the politicized response to then-First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's 1996 book, *It Takes a Village*. In accepting the Republican nomination for president shortly after Clinton's book appeared, Bob Dole voiced a reaction commonly heard on the political right: "And after the virtual devastation of the American family, the rock upon which this country was founded, we are told that it takes a village, that is collective, and thus the state, to raise a child…. And with all due respect, I am here to tell you it does not take a village to raise a child. It takes a family to raise a child."

[101] *See, e.g.*, Bonnie Lyon McDaniel's (2004, pp. 92-94) summary of an argument advanced by Eamonn Callan in his book *Creating Citizens*. *See also* Cris Mayo's (2004, pp. 123-124) critique of Jane Roland Martin's book, *The Schoolhome*.

[102] *See* McDaniel (2004, pp. 94-101) and Pijanowski (2004), both of which draw on D.W. Winnicott's (1971) theory of "good-enough" caregiving relationships.

Chapter 2

Institutionalizing the value of student-teacher relationships

It is easy enough to point to instances of exceptional teachers whose relationships with students seem exemplary. Indeed, the quality of student-teacher relationships is sometimes framed as a "teacher effect"—a function of the attitudes and aptitudes of individual teachers.[1] However, it is not at all obvious how we would go about making exceptionally good student-teacher relationships more common. Simply calling attention to their value seems unlikely to do the trick. What is needed, perhaps, are concrete changes in the institutional environment in which teachers work—in how space and time are used in schools, in how teachers are managed, and in how they are educated. In this chapter, we will consider what a plan to influence the institutional environment surrounding student-teacher relationships might involve.

Institutionalizing a reform vision is especially tricky when the whole idea is to make room for the kind of local, responsive, improvisational decision-making that good student-teacher relationships require. Unsurprisingly, proponents of a more pronounced focus on student-teacher relationships are typically skeptical of the notion that we can improve schools by encouraging faithful replication of some fixed instructional or organizational model. On the contrary, they often view attempts to replicate such models as antithetical to the goal of prioritizing relationships. Jonathan Kozol, for example, argues that the system's increasing reliance on standardized curricula and teaching methods tends to undercut the "chemistry" that must form between students and teachers.

> No curriculum, no rules, no lists of "standards," no externally established regimens, however good or wise they may appear to some, can substitute for this. That bond of trust and tenderness comes first. Without that, everything is merely dutiful—and deadening.[2]

Similarly, Nel Noddings contrasts approaches to school reform that demand fidelity to an approved instructional model with approaches that call for fidelity to the *persons* in one's care.[3] If we share this sense that there is a tension between the system's attempt to control teachers and teachers' attempts to bond with and care for students, then the aspiration to improve student-teacher relationships at a systemic level may start to seem paradoxical. How do you systematically institutionalize or scale up something that by its nature cannot be "externally established"?

At least in principle, there is a neat solution to this riddle. Even if it would be counter-productive to try to replicate particular relational practices (through the usual mix of mandates and sanctions), we might still try to foster the conditions under which student-teacher relationships are thought to flourish. Systemic reform, in other words, need not intensify the system's control over what happens in schools. There might be ways of shaping the environment that facilitate (without mandating) the emergence of stronger or better relationships on a large scale.

In fact, there is at least one influential current of school reform that has been pushing in that direction for a quarter century. Beginning in the late 1980s, reformers started talking about "restructuring" secondary schools, with the goal of moving them from a "bureaucratic" organizational model to a more "communal" form.[4] The distinction is borrowed from the field of organizational theory and can be applied to organizations of all kinds. Whereas "bureaucratic" organizations rely on impersonal rules and hierarchical authority to achieve their goals, "communal" organizations are supposed to rely on more fluid, open-ended cooperation and individual discretion. This means that communal organizations are uniquely dependent on high levels of interpersonal trust and commitment. If we are expecting people to engage with one another without the certainty that clearly-defined rules and roles provide, they have to see one another as trustworthy, supportive, and caring; they have to know one another, respect one another, and experience a sense of belonging when they are together. And just as communal organizations depend on interpersonal trust, they are also supposed to breed trust. Because people in communal organizations are not limited by highly specialized roles or rigid patterns of interaction, they have more opportunities to get to

know one another informally and to provide the kind of tailored support we might associate with committed social relationships. Thus, the movement to restructure secondary schools as communal organizations provides one illustrative case of an attempt to systemically improve and leverage social relationships in schools.

Practically speaking, the restructuring efforts focused on school size; the idea was to make secondary schools more communal primarily by making them smaller.[5] In fact, the most organized expression of the restructuring idea came to be known as the "small schools movement." Its primary target was (and is) "large and impersonal" high schools, especially in poor urban areas. Plans were hatched for breaking up comprehensive high schools and replacing them with Smaller Learning Communities ("SLCs"), often organized around a particular theme or focus (e.g. health professions, international studies, etc.). Under these plans, students and their families get to choose the SLC that most appeals to them from among several distinctive designs. To economize, a group of SLCs might share the building that formerly housed the large school they replaced, usually after some renovation to the old building. When several SLCs all remain at least loosely confederated as units within a single school, they are sometimes called Schools Within Schools, or "SWS's."[6]

The small school strategy won the backing of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other philanthropies, which helped fund and launch a series of small school initiatives around the country. Entire districts bought in, including some of the very largest. For instance, with the help of millions in grant funding from the Gates Foundation, Chicago Public Schools opened 23 small high schools between 2002 and 2005 as part of the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative (CHSRI).[7]

A team of researchers who studied the "implementation and impact" of CHSRI provide a detailed sketch of the theory behind small school reform. The idea, they explain, was that the more personal scale of a small school would create a context in which teachers feel more connected with their students and colleagues, more responsible for achieving the school's instructional mission, more free to innovate, more likely to set high expectations for themselves and their students, and ultimately more likely to work toward the improvement of their instructional practice. At the same time, students would feel a greater sense of belonging in a smaller organization and thus experience the social

context of the school as more supportive of their academic aspirations and personal needs. Simply put, the premise of CHSRI was that "small school reform enables the creation of school communities in which all students are held to high expectations and receive personal and academic support." The researchers note that "in large part, this hope rests on the assumption that smaller environments spur more personal relationships between students and teachers."[8]

Much of the initial enthusiasm for the small school movement was fueled by the exemplary results of a handful of small public schools serving poor and minority students. To some extent, these exemplars served as explicit models for efforts to develop small schools on a large scale. But as the researchers who studied CHSRI point out, many of those early models were "launched in a relatively idiosyncratic way. Their leaders may have had particular insights and visions; special connections; or a great deal of resources, drive, and so on."[9] Thus, it was not at all obvious to the researchers that replicating the basic structural feature that distinguishes those models—their small size—would be sufficient to produce comparable results. As it happened, CHSRI's early results were mixed at best and could fairly be described as disappointing.[10] These results, moreover, were consistent with the mixed evidence on the efficacy of SLCs in general.[11]

None of this is especially surprising. Public schools of every size are embedded within larger bureaucratic structures and a larger bureaucratic culture. Given that small schools are subject to many of the same incentives, mandates, budgetary constraints, and ideological influences as big schools, we might expect them to be more similar than different in their basic functioning.[12] Just to take one obvious example: class size and student loads might be just as large in SLCs as they are in big schools, resulting in similar patterns of interaction between students and teachers. Moreover, to the extent that they do function differently, we might expect that small schools and big schools would be prone to different kinds of dysfunction. As organizational theorists are at pains to point out, communal organizations and bureaucratic organizations each have their own characteristic pitfalls.

Nonetheless, acknowledging the limitations and challenges of smallness does not mean abandoning the basic intuition that, all else equal, smaller schools are more conducive to better student-teacher relationships. The question is: what other ingredients

must be in the mix? I suspect that most proponents of small school reform would say that the creation of SLCs is at most an enabling condition for the kind of social environment they hope to sustain. A robust plan to improve student-teacher relationships at scale must contain other elements as well.

The remainder of this chapter discusses three elements we might expect to find in such a plan. That is, we will explore three common proposals—besides reducing school size—for changing the institutional context of schooling to support large-scale improvement in student-teacher relationships. In broad terms, the strategies we will examine are:

1. Building protected time for relationship-building into the school schedule,
2. Building public accountability systems that rely less on standardization, and
3. Building teacher education programs that cultivate an ethos of caring.

These three strategies are meant to represent an instructive range of possibilities. I selected them in part because of their prominence in the scholarly literature; a discussion of reform strategies that target student-teacher relationships would seem incomplete without them. But I also picked them because, as a group, they capture some of the complexity of the system and thus the diversity of different sites or nodes of school reform. Together, they implicate a fairly wide array of different institutions—schools and districts of course, but also legislatures, state and federal bureaucracies, colleges and universities, community organizations, and so on. They raise different kinds of practical and conceptual questions and touch on three of the major areas of education policy: the design of learning environments, the design of public accountability structures, and the education of teachers. They vary also in terms of their ease of implementation and, perhaps, their likelihood of gaining traction. Each strategy is, in fact, a whole family of different ideas, representing a range of conceptions of the value of student-teacher relationships and a range of different diagnoses of why good student-teacher relationships are relatively uncommon.

Again, our aim here is understanding. On one hand, this means articulating and grappling with the theoretical underpinnings of each of the strategies we will consider. At the same time, it means making each strategy more concrete—painting a picture of

what it might look like that is vivid enough to generate good questions. We begin, then, with the strategy that is easiest to picture because versions of it are already so prevalent.

1. Building protected time for relationship-building into the school schedule

The clearest policy prescription I heard during my visits to Eagle Rock and Mapleton Early College came from one of MEC's longest-serving advisors. "Every single student in secondary education in the country," he told me, "should have advisory and should do some very basic advisory things like we do in our school." When I asked what those "basic advisory things" would include, he elaborated: "Just in terms of relationship-building, building a relationship with an advisor that can operate as a bridge between your academics and everything going on in your life outside school."

We may yet be far from the goal of providing "every single student in secondary education" an advisory experience like the one at MEC, but advisory programs of various flavors are fairly common. Group advisory periods became popular a generation ago as part of a suite of reforms designed to ease the transition from elementary school to middle school.[13] Researchers had documented a precipitous drop in students' academic engagement through that transition, which they attributed in part to an abrupt change in the organization of instruction. Explaining the emergence of advisory programs in a 1990 essay in *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine, Douglas Mac Iver observed that

> the typical organization of instruction in schools that enroll young adolescents interferes with the development of close, trusting relationships between students and teachers. For example, in a worthy attempt to provide students with high-quality instruction from subject-matter experts, many schools that serve middle grades establish departmentalized programs in which students receive instruction from a different teacher for each academic subject… As students change teachers every period (perhaps six or seven times a day), they may feel that no teacher or other adult in the school really knows them, cares about them, or is available to help them with problems. And their engagement in learning is likely to diminish as they begin to look outside the school for attention and rewards.[14]

According to Mac Iver, advisory programs were created as a direct response to this problem. They were intended to restore to students something they lose when they leave

elementary school: a close relationship with a single adult who is responsible for their overall development and wellbeing.

But what exactly is advisory? Mac Iver explains that "group advisory periods assign a small group of students to a teacher, administrator, or other staff member for a regularly scheduled (often daily) meeting to discuss topics important to students."[15] Ideally, these meetings would be used to engage students in "social and academic support activities," such as

> discussing problems with individual students, giving career information and guidance, developing student self-confidence and leadership, and discussing academic issues, personal or family problems, social relationships, peer groups, health issues, moral or ethical issues and values, and multicultural issues and intergroup relations.[16]

More recently, Larry McClure and his colleagues offered a similar definition, describing advisory as "the concept and practice of gathering students and an educator together for brief, regular periods in a non-content specific setting to deal with cognitive and affective educational topics."[17]

Within these broad parameters, there is significant variation in the structure and content of advisory programs. There may or may not be a prescribed "curriculum" or suggested menu of activities advisors are supposed to lead. There may be a more pronounced relative emphasis on academic versus socio-emotional support. Time may be allocated differently between one-on-one advising and group activity. Advisors may stay with their groups for a year, two years, or longer. Students may be assigned to advisories randomly, or they may be assigned based on their characteristics, affinities, preferences, or needs. Advisories may be multi-age or grade-level groupings.[18]

Given the predominance of other kinds of institutional objectives, it is unsurprising that group advisory periods are often used for purposes that have little to do with relationship-building. Mac Iver warned that

> although advisory or homeroom periods are common, many of the activities that occur during these periods are the mechanical tasks of keeping school (e.g., taking attendance, distributing notices, making announcements, orienting students to rules and programs) rather than social or academic support activities that use teachers' talents as advisors and that help students feel that someone is looking out for their interests and needs.[19]

This means that we cannot assume that any given period bearing the name "advisory" will reflect the intent that is supposed to be central to the concept. And even when that intent is present, we would expect specific practices and results to be uneven.

In an effort to identify the "best practices" that distinguish "effective" advisory programs, Sarah Brody Shulkind and Jack Foote studied a handful of middle school advisories in which students and advisors reported an especially high level of "connectedness."[20] Their findings contain few revelations. They claim, for instance, that strong advisories "address issues of community" and "promote open communication," and that strong advisors "know and care about their advisees." Shulkind and Foote offer relatively little detail on *how* these things are accomplished, though they do describe a few specific protocols and activities as common among successful advisories. Many of their observations are couched in general terms, such as the claim that caring advisors "notice" and "listen to" students, ask students "individualized questions about their personal lives," and "know and appreciate their personalities." Few educators would dispute these findings, but I'm also not sure how much they would learn from them.

A close look at the "best practices" identified by Shulkind and Foote does, however, highlight some of the ambiguities and complexities of cultivating relationships through advisory. For example, their discussion of the finding that "strong advisors are problem solvers and advice givers" suggests more than one interpretation of what it means to be a "problem solver." On one hand, they suggest that it could mean supplying students with concrete strategies for coping with a challenge they're facing. On the other hand, they say it means "empowering students by solving problems *with* them rather than *for* them"—that is, scaffolding a process that helps students take an active role in crafting their own solutions.[21] Presumably, both modes of support have a place in the advisor-advisee relationship, and the challenge lies in balancing them appropriately.

Shulkind and Foote also place great emphasis on the academic support role of advisors. They claim that "strong advisors closely supervise their advisees' academic progress" and that "students in advisories with high levels of connectedness were more likely to perceive links between academic performance and advisory than students in advisories with lower levels of connectedness."[22] It is unclear whether advisors foster connectedness by monitoring and supporting students' academic performance, or whether

improved academic performance helps students feel more connected to their advisories (or both). Either way, Shulkind and Foote seem to accept that the best advisories include plenty of time for students to complete their schoolwork, particularly in areas where they may be struggling. We might wonder, though, about the risk of advisories devolving into study halls that end up reinforcing the school's prioritization of academic performance.

These intricacies aside, proponents generally portray advisory as a straightforward application of the theory that relationships with adults meet the socio-emotional needs on which motivation and learning depend. As Shulkind and Foote explain, an

> advisory program facilitates these kinds of relationships and provides the structure that creates "connectedness" in a middle school. Connectedness is a characteristic of school cultures in which students have meaningful relationships with adults within the school, are engaged in the school, and feel a sense of belonging in the school. School connectedness is linked to higher grades, higher test scores, and lower dropout rates, regardless of students' socioeconomic status.[23]

If there is a hidden premise here, it is that academic courses in secondary schools do not provide regular opportunities for young people to interact with adults in ways that make them feel more "connected." Teachers acting on their own initiative may well initiate such interactions within the context of their regular courses, or through their sponsorship of various extra-curricular activities. But the theory behind advisory is that the structure of subject-specific courses tends to preclude those interactions. The idea is that an alternative structure—in which interactions are driven by students' particular needs and the goal of "connection," rather than the pace of the curriculum and the goal of coverage—is necessary to produce a different kind of relationship.

An example of one large-scale attempt to establish this sort of structure as a fixture within the public school system comes from Australia. In 1998, the Australian state of Victoria began

> a project aimed at a radical transformation of the way teachers related to senior students. The 'Advocacy Project' developed and tested a model in which each student would have a teacher who was committed to meeting with them regularly for a conversation about their learning and anything that helped or hindered it. The project started in a small way, with a three-school pilot project and a focus on improving the attendance and retention of post-compulsory students… Over the next four years, the project was so successful in achieving this objective that it expanded to over 150 Victorian state schools, in which a significant number of students were able to spend fifteen minutes each fortnight with a teacher-advocate

who was committed to listening to them and helping them deal with whatever issues—academic, psychological, or social—they were currently confronting.[24]

Though eventually "other projects were prioritized and funding for Advocacy ceased," many schools in the state retained the model in some form.

Bernie Neville, Kristen Hutchinson, and Tricia McCann were part of a group of researchers who studied the implementation of the advocacy model in high-need schools and have written extensively on its theoretical rationale. They suggest that advocacy programs are rooted in the familiar conviction that "we cannot expect children and adolescents to focus on their schooling unless their social and emotional needs are attended to. One way of doing this is to make sure they have a reliable and trustworthy adult to talk to." Since "it is not always possible for parents to fill this role," many Australian schools employ teams of specialized professionals—"welfare coordinators, school counselors, even chaplains"—to care for the "social and psychological wellbeing" of students. The idea of the Advocacy Project was to draw teachers into this role, assigning them "responsibility for seeing that each student's experience of school is a positive one and that schooling is a meaningful experience for them."

Unlike the group advisory periods we've been discussing, the Advocacy Project was originally intended to give students "a regular opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with a teacher-advocate about their learning." Over time, some schools developed variations on the model in which teachers hold more advisory-like meetings "with mentor groups of a dozen or so students each week, providing the students with the opportunity to use the group and the teacher/mentor to deal with whatever is important to them." Regardless of the format, Neville and his colleagues prefer the title "advocate"— over "mentor" or "advisor"—to emphasize that the teacher's task is "not to manage the student's behavior but to listen to the student and be a reliable support." The role requires a willingness to "persevere with the relationship" and a commitment to ensuring that "the young person's point of view is heard if they are in conflict with the teacher or the school." Thus, according to the researchers, "it works best when the advocate is not the student's classroom teacher, because the classroom teacher's need to manage the student can get in the way of the student talking freely and the teacher genuinely

listening." Indeed, "from the student's point of view it may be the classroom teacher who is the problem they need to talk about."

Although teacher-advocates are meant to be in a position to attend to students' "social and emotional needs," the focus of their interactions with students are supposed to be on their learning in school and their goals for further study. Neville and colleagues stress this point, returning to it frequently throughout their report. They maintain that "the advocate is not the student's counselor." The advocate "meets with the student to discuss learning, not social or emotional problems." But, they continue, "the paradox in this is that the focus on learning provides students with the opportunity to deal with everything else." When teachers "encourage students to talk about whatever is preventing them from making the most of being at school" they may discover a "welfare issue which needs to be referred to a different kind of expert." The researchers claim that "more usually it is a learning issue which fits within the expertise of the teacher. Most often, all the student needs is to have someone listen and understand."

The opportunity for students to talk about their learning experiences with a teacher who will "listen and understand" is the defining feature of the advocacy model— and the key to the model's ambition of transforming the entire school culture. One of the researchers, Tricia McCann, describes the way advocacy relationships would "ideally" influence students' perceptions of the school and their place within it:

> Having experienced a congruent, empathic and accepting relationships with a teacher within the school, they would find that they were not being judged, drowned in expectations or limited by external benchmarks of behaviour or academic achievement. Building on this, students would develop a sense of self as a person with potential and would develop the capacity to become aware of their own motivations and potential.[25]

McCann suggests that the impact on teachers could be just as dramatic. Ideally, "teachers would notice that a helping relationship mitigates against marginalisation and disconnection of students and this awareness would lead to a positive shift in school culture and teacher/student attitudes and relationships." She imagines that the cascade of changes touched off by teachers' experience of relating to students as advocates will lead to "more student centred" approaches to "teaching and curriculum."[26]

Thus, from the perspective of Neville and colleagues, advocacy programs are so valuable—and fragile—precisely because they unsettle ingrained assumptions about the teacher's role in facilitating learning. They note that "many of the teacher's habitual behaviours have to be abandoned in the advocacy role." In particular, "the advocate does not reprimand, evaluate, instruct, direct, interpret, control or even (most of the time) advise."[27] The researchers seem to believe that by encouraging teachers to inhabit this alternate role at least some of the time, advocacy programs will help them develop less coercive relationships with the students in their regular classes. Citing some of the theorists we met in the last chapter (especially Carl Rogers and William Glasser), they argue that such non-coercive relationships are critical to students' sense of safety and belonging and thus ultimately to their learning.

Neville and colleagues also frame the Advocacy Project as a challenge to the prevailing political discourse around school reform. They complain that "for a couple decades, it has been unfashionable within State systems of Education to promote the notion that schools have any business focusing attention on students' psychological or spiritual wellbeing."[28] Under the current zeitgeist, "politicians of all persuasions have perceived the function of schools in terms of their contribution to the economy," reducing the purpose of schooling to "fashioning skilled and compliant workers."[29] In contrast, the Advocacy Project is supposed to revive and reflect the deeper purpose of educating citizens for democracy—and to provide a kind of antidote to the anti-democratic tendencies of schooling.

> If the message of schools is that the more powerful members of society have the right to command the less powerful members, irrespective of whether the latter believe it is in their best interests, they will carry this message into their adult lives. Unless the students in our schools experience democratic processes in their schooling and come to take responsibility for the impact of their actions in the community to which they belong, they are unlikely to develop the attitudes and skills required of members of a mature democratic society.[30]

Neville and colleagues suspect that for many school administrators, the appeal of advocacy programs lies primarily in evidence that they improve the school's performance on accountability metrics. But they insist that the most valuable outcome of the program would be for students to get the message that "mature democratic societies and organizations are founded on mutual respect."

As unabashed promoters of the advocacy model, Neville and colleagues do not conceal their irritation with the state officials who formally discontinued it. "Apparently," they remark, "once we know that something works, we do not need to do it any longer."[31] Yet not everybody who participated in the Advocacy Project was equally enthusiastic about its benefits. The external evaluator who studied the project's implementation reported that over a quarter of the students surveyed said that they "did not like advocacy." These students "generally did not meet their advocates as regularly as was recommended, either through their own choice or because the advocate was not consistently available." Some students claimed that they "did not need advocacy" because they had sufficient support at home. Others found the experience "'nannying, patronising or controlling and did not need it' or felt that their advocate did not have the necessary interpersonal skills to support them."[32]

In a study of three California high schools with advisory programs, Kate Phillippo illuminates some of the dynamics that help explain why formalized efforts to establish "close" student-teacher relationships don't always have the intended effect. In interviews with students[33] about their interactions with advisors and other adults in the school, Phillippo learned that some students experienced teachers' interest in their personal lives as a threat to their privacy. Some students, moreover,

> felt pressured to engage in relationships that they did not necessarily want or did not consider authentic. Advisors were literally assigned to know students well. Yet some participants felt that advisors acted *as if* they knew them well before developing an authentic relationship with them… Schools required advisors to know a lot about their advisees. Participants understood this role, and often appreciated having teachers who wanted to know and help them, but some felt pressed into relationships with advisors. 17 participants [out of 34] said they did not like discussing personal matters with teachers.[34]

Phillippo does not dispute the theory that students need and benefit from strong affective bonds with adults; in fact, she presents plenty of evidence consistent with that theory. But she suggests that students prefer opportunities to develop relationships of their own choosing, on their own initiative, at their own pace, based on their own assessments of teachers' trustworthiness and interpersonal skills—"rather than relationships mandated by teachers' roles." She observes that "when advisors pushed for relationships because they

were assigned that role, students did not always cooperate, or, contrary to the goals of personalism, retreated from them."[35]

Phillippo's analysis captures a persistent criticism of advisory (or similar programs) as an organizational strategy for improving student-teacher relationships. As the argument goes, if teachers are going to really know and care for students, they must develop what Phillippo calls a "gradual, organic, mutual" connection.[36] The relationship can never be forced, which is arguably what tends to happen when teachers are mandated to form relationships with an assigned group of students. As one group of researchers put it, students readily distinguish "between the lived experiences of personalization versus the more bureaucratic, instrumental quality of advisory programs."[37] The implication, they suggest, is that "more natural alternatives to structurally and culturally cumbersome advisory programs might be more successful."[38]

Proponents of advisory programs worry, though, that "more natural alternatives" may be inadequate precisely because they don't provide a dedicated structure for fostering meaningful relationships. Perhaps we would ideally like to see every student form a deep and caring relationship with a teacher "organically"—i.e. without trying to accelerate and control the growth of these relationships through formal programming. But what if allegiance to that ideal yields only haphazard and spotty results? As Neville and colleagues argue, the purpose of institutionalizing a model of relationship-building is

> to take some of the randomness out of satisfying students' needs for safety and affirmation. Many students are lucky enough in the quality of the relationships offered them by their teachers. Others are not. Incorporating advocacy into a school's processes and structures is designed to ensure that the students in most need of a consistently supportive relationship will get it, and that the teachers most capable of providing it are given the support (and, where necessary, the training) to do so.[39]

The idea here is that while a lucky few may do fine on their own, students and teachers generally need to be nudged into the difficult work of relationship-building. They need time dedicated for that purpose, protected from all the other demands the institution makes on them. And some of them can surely benefit from a variety of tools and routines that "scaffold" the process of getting to know one another. Presumably, we could make such tools available, while still granting teachers discretion to ignore or modify them whenever their use starts to feel forced, or whenever a more "organic" process of

relationship-building seems likely to bear fruit. For that matter, we could see formal advisory (or "advocacy") programs not as imposing yet another mandate, but as creating a context that enables organic relationships to develop more consistently.

So maybe the question isn't whether we should institutionalize some context for relationship-building, but whether regular meetings framed explicitly around advising, mentoring, or advocacy offer the most conducive context for that purpose. Kirstin Hutchison, one of the researchers who studied the Advocacy Project in Victoria, implicitly raises this question in an essay profiling a handful of "vulnerable" students who managed to forge positive relationships with adults at their schools. One of the students she profiles, named Sam, did seem to benefit from his participation in formal group mentoring sessions led by one of his teachers. Hutchison reports that through these weekly sessions, Sam and his peers "increased their capacity to sustain productive interpersonal relationships with teachers and fellow students and make considered decisions about their learning."[40] Hutchison also profiles Caitlin, a mostly disengaged student at another school who was assigned no formal mentor or advocate but was lucky enough to find an "informal champion" in her music teacher. Because the music teacher supported Caitlin and her friends in forming a school rock band, their relationship extended even into semesters when formal music electives weren't offered. Hutchison reports that Caitlin "continued to encounter serious personal challenges," but "through the informal advocacy mentoring she received from her music teacher, she effected a suite of powerful attitudinal shifts." She "found a more positive friendship group" and began making concrete plans to continue her musical studies.[41]

At first glance, the stories of Sam and Caitlin seem to track the distinction between relationships that emerge from formal, mandatory programs and relationships that emerge through more *ad hoc*, organic processes. In Sam's case, the context for the development of positive relationships was a space dedicated explicitly to mentoring activities; in Caitlin's case, it was "a passionate affinity space" built around the appreciation and creation of music.[42] Yet however informal Caitlin's mentoring relationship with her music teacher seems, we should note the role that at least one formal school structure—the music elective—played in its emergence. And we can imagine

schools creating "affinity spaces" like bands, rather than "mentoring groups" like advisories, as part of a formal strategy for fostering positive student-teacher relationships.

Hutchison presents a third case that illustrates this possibility: a surfing program offered by one of the schools she studied. Every Friday, the program brought together a group of students, alums, and teachers, who would ride the surf bus "down the coast in search of a wave." The students in the surf program generally have no prior experience with or interest in surfing. Their families "were not in a position to take holidays or buy them surfboards or wet suits, or drive them to the beach or pay for surf lessons."[43]

The surf program's "instigator," a teacher named Frank, explains that he runs the program in part because "education should also include learning how to enjoy life; this is what I believe surfing is about. It enables you to really be exhilarated at certain moments in time."[44] But Frank particularly emphasizes the ways in which the surf program

> brings community into the school; whoever is on the bus that day has a real sense of identity, of belonging to that group which means you respect each other and you have to get along with the rest of the group. For me it is really valuable for building trusting relationships with students. When I see them during the school day today, we know we have got that very special bond of jumping off the rock there at Eagle Point and you know, getting cleaned up… The memory of that sort of gets lost, but at those moments we can get back there again, so I think it is important that it is put away for later.[45]

The surf program thus provides an intriguing model of a programmatic approach to enhancing student-teacher relationships that does not rely on the artifice of assigning teachers to get to know students. It combines the structure and regularity of Sam's mentoring group with the "organic" qualities of Caitlin's relationship with her music teacher. It prompts us to consider the possibility of reconstituting advisories, where the explicit goal is to deal with issues raised by students, as "passionate affinity spaces," where the organizing purpose is to share in an exhilarating learning experience.

Or it could prompt us to go even further. One of the criticisms of programmatic efforts to structure positive student-teacher interactions is that they carve out some space for relationship-building at the margins of the school schedule while leaving the "core" instructional program largely untouched.[46] As we've seen, the theory behind programs like advisory or the surf bus is that the relationships they foster will have a spillover effect that transforms the whole school culture, including curriculum and instruction in

academic courses. But if the goal is to transform the quality of student-teacher relationships as a means of improving teaching and learning across the curriculum, then why not consider the surf program as a model for *all* courses? That is, why not conceive of school as a patchwork of passionate affinity spaces? As educators in the tradition of John Dewey have been proclaiming for over a century, if we organize the curriculum as a series of opportunities for students to participate in "real" social practices—from surfing to woodworking to literary criticism—there will be practically infinite opportunities to expose students to useful knowledge.[47]

Many challenges await anyone who would try to reorganize the curriculum around social practices that students and teachers could pursue passionately together. But right now, the most obvious barriers to realizing that vision on a large scale are accountability structures that presuppose a fairly standardized academic program. Although it's surely possible to organize a course in a standard academic subject as a passionate affinity space, a defining characteristic of such spaces is arguably the freedom of participants to construct their own goals and standards of success. If so, then as long as accountability structures require students and teachers to pursue standardized instructional objectives, efforts to leverage the power of student-teacher relationships will have difficulty penetrating the instructional core of schooling. That, at any rate, is the argument we consider in the next section, which discusses alternatives to existing public accountability systems.

2. Building public accountability systems that rely less on standardization

Beginning in the late 1980s, a theory of change known as "standards-based reform" began to dominate education policy. Its premise was that a coordinated effort to improve instruction must begin with a clear set of specific, state-mandated expectations for what students should "know and be able to do" at particular times. Through assessments pegged to these benchmarks, schools could be held accountable for student learning. The threat of accountability would motivate school leaders to closely monitor and evaluate teachers, using assessment data to guide improvement efforts. The worst

teachers would be fired, the best teachers would be rewarded and emulated, and average teachers would receive the support they need to get better.[48]

Around the same time the standards-based movement was taking root, a former kindergarten teacher named Deborah Meier was winning accolades for her work as the founder of Central Park East, a family of three small public elementary schools and one small public secondary school in Harlem. The success of these schools earned Meier a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" and made her an icon of the fledgling small schools movement. Systemic efforts to replace large urban high schools with smaller ones have drawn explicitly on Central Park East Secondary School as a model, and Meier herself has had a hand in some of those initiatives.[49]

At some point, Meier's advocacy for small schools began to dovetail with a comprehensive critique of standards-based reform.[50] She has criticized state standards as requiring superficial coverage of too many topics at a breakneck pace. She has called attention to the narrowing of curricula to tested subjects and the narrowing of opportunities for teachers to plan creative, interdisciplinary units. And she has questioned the premise that standardized tests yield more useful data for the purposes of instructional improvement than a close examination of students' work by people who know them. Underpinning all of these criticisms is an argument about the impact of standardization on social relationships in the school community.

Meier envisions schools first and foremost as sites of productive intergenerational encounters. She is convinced that what young people really need—and want—is "to be in the company of adults who are doing adult work."[51] She notes that for all the faults of pre-industrial societies, they tended at least to place children and adolescents in close contact with adults who had something to teach them and with whom they felt some affinity. Until relatively recently, young people "spent their time in the midst of multiage settings from birth on—small communities, farms, workplaces where they knew grown-ups intimately and knew a lot about how they went about their work, negotiating their way through life." While "being young in the olden days wasn't idyllic," institutional arrangements did afford young people opportunities to learn from adults "by working alongside them, picking up the language and customs of grown-upness through both instruction and immersion, much as they had learned to talk and walk."

Meier believes that contemporary institutional arrangements tend to isolate young people from the adult world. For the most part, children and adolescents do not get to see family and community members at work, much less collaborate with them. Meier suggests that in principle, schools could mitigate this isolation by offering students the company of a group of adults—teachers—who are committed to sharing their world with young people. Instead, she argues, the school system mainly exacerbates young people's alienation from adults. She perceives that "many young people literally finish four years of high school without knowing or being known by a single adult in the school building." For too many students, formal education consists of sitting, "largely passively, through one after another different subject matter in no special order of relevance, directed by people they can't imagine becoming, much less would like to become." Thus,

> we've cut kids adrift, without the support or nurturance of grown-ups, without the surrounding of a community in which they might feel it safe to try out various roles, listen into the world of adults whom they might someday want to join as full members. At earlier and earlier ages they must negotiate with a variety of barely familiar adults, increasingly barren classrooms, and increasingly complex institutional settings…

She observes wryly that in confining students to modern schools, we have built "perhaps the only civilization in history that organizes its youth so that the nearer they get to being adults the less and less likely they are to know any adults."

According to Meier, the alienation of young people from their teachers has been abetted by the rise of standards-based reform. Her argument is that students can never really trust or grow close with teachers whom they perceive as mere "vehicles for implementing externally imposed standards."[52] Seeing teachers strain to put them through the paces of a standardized curriculum, young people get the message: these aren't potential companions and role models, fascinating representatives of the world of adults. These are functionaries, representatives of a state that doesn't know me or have anything to do with me. Of course, there are many teachers who manage in the midst of covering the state-mandated standards to show enough personality of their own and interest in their students to command students' respect. But according to Meier, an important reason so many students don't want to learn from their teachers is that they don't get to know them as creative, proactive, interesting people who enjoy a great deal

of trust and responsibility. "What kid, after all, wants to be seen emulating people he's been told are too dumb to exercise real power and are simply implementing the commands of the real experts?"[53] Conversely, Meier suggests that young people will gravitate toward teachers who are empowered to create distinctive learning environments that reflect their passions and their connections to real communities.

This point strikes at the heart of one of the leading arguments advanced by proponents of standard-based reform: that by increasing schools' and teachers' accountability for measurable outcomes, we can actually enhance their autonomy over instructional methods and strategies. The argument relies on a basic distinction in organizational theory between "behavior-based" and "output-based" control systems.[54] Organizations use behavior controls when they specify a precise set of operating procedures that employees must follow in performing their work. In schools, rules requiring teachers to engage in specific instructional practices (e.g. to enforce a codified disciplinary system, to conform to a particular lesson-planning template, or to use standardized curricular materials) are all examples of behavior-based controls. Organizations use output controls when they reward or punish employees based on the measurable results of their work. In education, the clearest examples of output-based control systems are policies that make students' standardized test scores a factor in teacher pay, promotion, and retention.

Many organizations, including schools and school systems, use behavior and output controls in tandem. But a key premise of standards-based reform was that tight behavioral controls are inappropriate to the work of teaching and thus counterproductive to the goal of large-scale school improvement. For one thing, teachers' adherence to specific instructional or organizational practices can be difficult to monitor. More importantly, the question of how best to teach any given student in any given context is fraught with uncertainty; the danger of too-stringent behavior-based controls is that they stifle innovation and professional discretion.[55] Thus, reformers hoped that by offering schools greater control over methods in return for greater accountability for outcomes, they could free—and motivate—educators to figure out for themselves how to achieve the desired results. As long as teachers found ways to improve (measured) student achievement, they could structure the learning process any way they liked.[56]

In retrospect, there are lots of reasons to have doubted the promise that standards-based reform would enhance teachers' and schools' control over pedagogy. The standardization of outcomes makes it much easier to standardize operating procedures; once it's clear what will be tested and how, central offices can identify or create curricular materials, lesson plans, and interim assessments that are "aligned" with tested learning objectives. Moreover, the stakes attached to accountability tests ratchet up administrators' incentive to mandate teachers' use of "proven" materials and practices. It is unsurprising, then, that the enactment of "tougher" accountability policies has coincided with the proliferation of more prescriptive curricula and closer monitoring of teachers' fidelity to approved instructional methods.[57]

Meier's point, though, is that the bargain at the heart of standards-based reform was premised on a faulty notion of the kind of flexibility teachers really need. Its flaw lay in ignoring the ways in which state-mandated standards undermine teachers' efforts to earn the trust of the students and communities they serve. For Meier, a critical step toward building that trust is working together to define a set of valued learning activities and goals. When the outcomes are fixed in advance by someone else, that cooperative process—and the mutual respect it engenders—is short-circuited. Creating the kind of community where young people *want* to belong means creating a community that is responsible, to a substantial degree, for setting its own standards.

Notice that Meier's critique of standards-based reform is not framed as an argument against placing standards at the heart of teachers' work. The question isn't whether to have standards, or even what they should be; the questions are where the standards should come from and *whose* they should be. "Standards, yes. Absolutely," Meier declares. But what we need are "standards held by real people who matter in the lives of our young. School, family, and community must forge their own, in dialogue with and in response to the larger world of which they are a part."[58] The problem with standardization is precisely that it substitutes disembodied requirements for "standards held by real people who matter" to students. That is why, after decades of standards-based reform, we are missing "teachers, kids, and families who know each other or each other's work and take responsibility for it; we are missing communities built around their own articulated and public standards and ready to show them off to others."[59]

Of course, not everybody shares Meier's confidence in the capacity of communities to "forge their own" standards. From its inception, the standards-based movement pitched itself as a cure for the supposed excesses of the American tradition of local control over schools.[60] Many reformers felt that the jumble of overlapping layers of authority that characterize the American school system compared unfavorably with the (supposedly) more coherent, orderly, centralized education systems of Europe and Asia. They wondered how such a fragmented system could ever achieve large-scale instructional improvement, with every teacher, school, and district protecting their turf and "doing their own thing." Even worse, they contended, the traditions of local control and teacher autonomy gave cover to educators who through their incompetence, indifference, or prejudice were failing to educate large numbers of children, disproportionately concentrated in low-income and minority communities. They argued that decades of local control had yielded the achievement gap and mediocre records of performance on internationally benchmarked assessments. From this perspective, state-mandated standards and federally-mandated accountability regimes seemed like a step in the right direction; some reformers dreamt of the day when national standards and assessments would become politically feasible.

This narrative reminds us that standardization happened for a reason, and that the accountability it makes possible remains for many a worthy and compelling purpose. But even if we acknowledge the checkered history and limited capacities of local communities in educating their young, shouldn't we also be wary of "the system's" influence? The assumption of standards-based reform seems to be that the system—unlike some of the people it would hold accountable—always has the student's best interest at heart and always puts the student first. But critics point out that the system, which has no knowledge of particular students and their particular needs, inevitably takes on a life and interests of its own. The system has its own needs—for data, control, order, political legitimacy—that in the end compete with students' needs. The concern is that as teachers find themselves increasingly at the service of the system, their relationships with students will suffer.

Hillary Cottam, whom we met briefly in the Prologue, makes this same point about the provision of welfare services in the United Kingdom. In shadowing the front-

line caseworkers assigned to help welfare recipients, Cottam and her team found that 86 percent of their time is spent on tasks that are "system-driven—filling in forms for accountability and discussing them with colleagues." Those demands of course limited the time caseworkers could spend with their clients. But what especially struck Cottam was the way that the system's needs dominated even those brief interactions.

> Most shockingly, even the 14 per cent of time spent face to face with a family member is not developmental. The dialogue between [caseworker] and [client] is dictated by the forms and their need for data and information. This squeezes out any possibility of the sort of conversation that might be needed to develop a supportive relationship as a first step in fostering change.[61]

I suspect that many teachers struggling to establish supportive relationships with students while meeting "system-driven" expectations would recognize their schools in Cottam's portrayal of British welfare agencies.

So we seem to be stuck. On one hand, we might agree with Meier that if small, autonomous schools are allowed to set their own standards, that process will bring students, teachers, and families closer together. At the same time, we might feel that some system is necessary to protect young people from adults who are either unwilling or unable to set appropriate standards. Must we accept a tradeoff, then, between the benefits of accountability and local control? Or is there some way of enhancing both? Put differently: can we have an accountability system that does not rely on standardization?

In theory, one option is to dispense entirely with bureaucratic systems in favor of what organization theorists call "market controls."[62] Creating a market for schooling means providing every family with the financial resources and information they need to choose the school they think best for their children. The public role in education would be limited to enforcing some basic norms (e.g. non-discrimination), providing each family vouchers to cover tuition at the school of their choice, and perhaps administering a clearinghouse of information about each school's track record. Schools would be publicly-funded but privately-run entities, meaning that they would not be controlled by or ultimately accountable to the state. Yet they would be disciplined by the imperative of attracting and retaining students. Dissatisfied families could take their children—and their tuition dollars—elsewhere. The argument is that this form of accountability focuses

educators directly on students and their needs, since a school subject to market controls will fail and close if it becomes unresponsive.

In the United States, the movement to privatize schooling has consistently met stiff resistance and has succeeded in enacting only a few modest voucher programs. Opponents cite a long list of ways in which an experiment in privatization might go wrong.[63] Families that can afford to supplement their vouchers will enroll their children in higher priced schools, deepening income-based segregation and exacerbating inequities in educational opportunity. As market forces churn, schools would come and go—especially in poorer areas—robbing children and communities of an important source of social stability. There would be no guarantee of a decent school in every neighborhood, leaving many families without a local option. Some of the new entrants into the school market would be inexperienced, unscrupulous, or even predatory, and by the time their shortcomings are revealed, students will have lost years of educational opportunity. It is unclear that parents will have all the information they need to make sound decisions; many will be victims of marketing gimmicks and fraud.

Governments would of course try to cure these problems by regulating the education market, but a tightly-regulated market might land us back where we started: within a complex system of bureaucratic controls. Indeed, even in the absence of bureaucratic controls, market forces might push schools toward standardization anyway. As Meier observes, "our experience with marketplace competition suggests that it too prefers standardized solutions and offers diversity only when there's a small niche market that offers a sufficiently great profit."[64] But if opponents of privatization argue that the market will be no better than the public system at increasing the quality and variety of educational options, proponents counter that it certainly will be no worse. After all, they point out, the public system already exhibits the various forms of dysfunction we fear from a privatized education market. Nobody contends that the marketplace will produce an educational utopia, just that its advantages outweigh its costs.

Ultimately, I think the argument against privatization comes down to the view that schools serve a civic purpose.[65] The concern is that if we reduce education to a consumer good—something you procure for your own benefit—then we miss the role of schools in constituting a shared community with common ideals and institutions.

Schools are, indeed, among the few public institutions in which a large majority of citizens participate. As Meier puts it: "It is in schools that we learn the art of living together as citizens, and it is in public school that we are obliged to defend the idea of a public, not only a private interest."[66] For Meier, then, building and maintaining a school system is part of the project of building and maintaining a democratic society. "The odds," she writes, "must be stacked against any too easy escape from the annoyances of our fellow citizens."[67] A public school system expresses citizens' shared commitment to one another—our willingness to be part of something together, despite the "annoyances."

If we find ourselves in Meier's camp, then we face a daunting challenge. The challenge is to devise a system that takes responsibility for "all our children" yet at the same time trusts individual schools and teachers to set their own standards. Such a system would honor the variety of acceptable ways of organizing a learning community while at the same time acknowledging that "there exists a larger community—one we all have a stake in—a shared public."[68] Meier thinks that such a system is possible, and she summarizes her vision of it this way:

> What we need is a new system whose central task is to protect the public space needed for innovation. We need a lean, mean system, with a limited but critical accountability function, to be guardian of our common public interest, but one that respects the fact that schools must be first and foremost responsive to their own constituents—the members of their community—not to the system.[69]

That may sound abstract, but Meier does more than most critics of standards-based reform to sketch a concrete alternative to the current accountability system. In fact, she is one of the few who can claim to have designed such an alternative herself.

In the mid-1990s, Meier worked with a group of like-minded reformers to design a system-within-the-system that would better accommodate the kind of schools they were promoting.[70] Under the auspices of the New York City board of education, they planned to establish an experimental "Learning Zone" that would serve no more than five percent of the city's student population (50,000 students) in over 100 small schools. A core tenet of the project was that "every school must have the power and the responsibility to select and design its own particulars and thus surround all youngsters with powerful adults who are in a position to act on their behalf in open and publicly responsible ways." Thus, "the

key question" for the designers of this new public system "was how to support and hold accountable schools that were, on purpose, so very unalike?"

The challenge called for the development of new accountability structures. In Meier's view, the very nature of the small, self-governing schools in the Learning Zone brought into play powerful mechanisms of internal accountability. These were, after all, schools designed to encourage the active participation of people who knew how students were doing and had a personal stake in their success. But Meier recognized that the Learning Zone would also have "to answer the legitimate demand to be accountable to the public." Indeed, her team embraced the discipline of a robust public accountability system; without it, Meier argues, "well-intentioned individual schools can too easily become stuck in routines, parochial, smug, and secretive—even tyrannical, even racist." So the creators of the Learning Zone set about designing "forms of public accountability" that they viewed as consistent with their vision of schools as self-governing communities accountable primarily to their own members.

The system they devised required all schools to report on "a lean list of standard common indicators" but otherwise allowed individual schools to define and demonstrate students' success in their own ways. Each school was, however, required to make their standards and their methods of assessment explicit. According to Meier, most of the new high schools in the Learning Zone chose to adopt a set of standards and an assessment model that had already been developed by one of the existing small high schools in the system. All of these models, she notes, "enlisted college faculty members, parents, community members, and other high school teachers as part of an ongoing review of student work and faculty standards." The schools in the system also agreed to "accept new forms of collegial oversight" by their peers within the Learning Zone. To that end, the schools were to be grouped into "small learning networks of four to seven sister schools," with the expectation that "each network would organize a system of collective review of each other's work." These networks, in turn, would be audited by "formal review panels" comprising both "critical friends" and "more distanced and skeptical" representatives of the public interest. These auditors "would demand convincing evidence that the network of schools under review was doing its job as promised" and submit their findings and recommendations in a public report to the democratically

elected school board. Finally, the system called for all schools to contribute various forms of data—student work, statistical measures of student outcomes, etc.—to a database that the public could use to study and evaluate the Learning Zone experiment.

There are of course other ways to balance self-governance with public accountability, but Meier's plan reflects a key design principle for any accountability system that does not rely on standardization. Rather than trying to control either the processes or outputs of instruction, it creates a set of public rituals, organizational routines, and social networks that encourage schools to articulate and examine their aims and methods, their triumphs and struggles. Nothing is predetermined, but everything (or nearly everything) is up for public discussion. The accountability mechanisms Meier is proposing never work mechanically. They ultimately come down to dialogue and negotiation with others who have a legitimate stake in the educational enterprise.

Meier and her team never got to put their plans for the Learning Zone into action. They were forced to abandon their design for a complicated set of reasons, beginning perhaps with changes in leadership at both the state and district level. This lack of continuity made it difficult for the architects of the Learning Zone to maintain consistent support for "an idea that was in itself not easy to grasp or summarize quickly—and was decidedly unusual." As the commitment of public officials wavered and waned, the coalition behind the plan began to unravel. Meier suggests that "these might have been temporary setbacks," but for the rise of "a new wave of reform" that "argued for centrally-designed and measurable results with high-stakes penalties for failure to meet numeric testing goals." Within an environment of "top-down standardization," the idea of schools publicizing their own standards and participating in collegial accountability networks audited by formal review panels became unthinkable.

It is impossible to say what would have happened if the kind of public accountability system Meier envisioned had been implemented. Would the checks and balances built into the system have promoted trust and transparency, or would they have deepened suspicions and divisions? Would they have facilitated a process of reflection and introspection that helps schools learn from experience, or would they have imposed cumbersome reporting requirements on overworked teachers and administrators? Perhaps all of the above, to varying degrees? And regardless of how well it may have

functioned, would the Learning Zone's unique accountability framework have succumbed to the inevitability of standardization? After all, as Meier recognizes, bureaucracies prefer standardization for reasons that go well beyond accountability. Standardization makes life easier for managers and clerks in the central office, provides the appearance of rationality and legitimacy, and satisfies leaders' strong personal and political urge to exert control.

Though Meier offers her story about the Learning Zone as a glimpse of what might yet be, it is hard not to take it as a cold dose of reality. It is one thing to design an accountability system that is in principle compatible with giving teachers responsibility for setting learning goals and standards. It is quite another matter to transform a political and cultural discourse from one characterized by mistrust for teachers into one that views teachers as fundamentally trustworthy. If Meier is right about the roots of school failure, then we are caught in a stubborn Catch-22: we won't trust teachers because we find so many schools unsatisfactory, but the reason schools are so unsatisfactory is that we haven't trusted teachers!

Many reform strategies aim to build trust in the teaching force by attracting and retaining more capable recruits. But here, too, a Catch-22 ensnares us: teachers won't be trusted until we attract more trustworthy people into teaching, but we might have difficulty attracting trustworthy people into an untrusted profession. Nonetheless, if we intend to pursue proposals like Meier's, it seems sensible to do so in combination with efforts to enhance the quality—and thus the trustworthiness—of the teaching force. A focal point of such efforts, of course, is the reform of pre-service teacher education programs based at colleges and universities. In the next section, we consider the role that these programs might play in enhancing the capacity of prospective teachers to form productive relationships with their future students.

3. Building teacher education programs that cultivate an ethos of caring

University-based teacher education programs have long been blamed for the apparent shortage of high-quality teachers in American classrooms. Pam Grossman, now

the dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, wrote in 2008 that "it's hard not to feel defensive as a teacher educator these days."[71]   The criticisms have scarcely changed over the decades. Ken Zeichner, whose career as a prominent teacher educator spans nearly half a century, recalls that critics have always complained about the "allegedly low academic standards in teacher education programs and the weak content knowledge of prospective teachers."[72] Skepticism about the value of the preparation offered by schools of education has led some critics—including the U.S. Department of Education—to advocate for the expansion of "alternative route" programs that streamline certification requirements and bypass traditional university-based programs.[73] More recently, the Department has taken a different tack, proposing federal regulations that would hold schools of education accountable for the performance of their graduates.[74]

In the meantime, enrollment in university-based teacher education programs has been declining nationwide, with the steepest drops occurring in some of the most populous states. A 2015 National Public Radio story reported that "in California, enrollment is down 53 percent over the past five years. It's down sharply in New York and Texas as well."[75]   It is important to note that this trend can be attributed largely to forces beyond the control of teacher educators, such as "the erosion of teaching's image as a stable career."[76] Whatever its cause, the trend is affecting traditional and alternative pathways into teaching alike. Teach for America, a popular alternative route program that made its reputation attracting top graduates from elite colleges and universities, has seen applications drop by 35 percent between 2013 and 2016.[77] But while university-based teacher educators may not be responsible for the shrinking pool of qualified teaching candidates, their future success likely depends on their ability to help reverse the decline. At the very least, declining enrollments complicate the efforts of ed schools to show that they can meet the country's demand for high-quality teachers.

Teacher educators have been far from complacent in the face of these challenges. Like public elementary and secondary schools, ed schools have been undergoing wave after wave of reform. Of course, as in all areas of education reform, there is no single, universally accepted vision for improving teachers' professional preparation. However, it

is fair to say that a particular approach sometimes known as "practice-based teacher education" has been coalescing and gaining steam in recent years.

In a 2014 article discussing this "new wave of reform," Francesca Forzani explains that it aims first of all to identify a set of "core" or "high-leverage" practices that beginning teachers must master "before they are permitted to assume independent responsibility for a classroom."[78] Ultimately, the goal is "the development of pedagogies that are effective for training novices in the use of core practices." In programs shaped by this approach,

> the curriculum is deliberately focused on specific practices of teaching such as leading discussions and modeling academic content. These are generally specified to students from the outset of a program or course and form the core of assignments or even program completion requirements. The practices are articulated in detail, and students are engaged in scaffolded opportunities to study and practice each one, usually first using videos or other records of practice, then in simulated situations with their peers, and finally in K-12 classrooms, where they are often closely coached.[79]

Forzani refers to this as the "core practices" model, distinguishing it from other models that might call themselves "practice-based" but lack a sharp focus on learning to enact a well-defined set of instructional routines. In particular, she contrasts the core practices model with teacher education programs that "use a curriculum structured around broader domains of teaching, such as 'content methods' or 'educational psychology.'" In such programs, she says, "students might learn specific teaching practices because they encounter them in the field or participate in an assignment where they happen to try one out, but a good deal is left to chance—focal practices are not clearly identified or tied to final course grades or graduation requirements." Thus, "novices might spend months in student teaching or participating in a residency program and never learn how to lead a productive whole-group discussion, for example, because the practice has not been clearly identified as something to learn."[80]

Forzani helps lead a center at the University of Michigan called TeachingWorks, which has been at the forefront of the current effort to identify a set of "high-leverage practices" that all beginning teachers can and must master by the time they are certified. The scholars at TeachingWorks have identified nineteen such practices, which are listed on its website along with brief explanatory blurbs. The list includes items such as

"leading a group discussion," "diagnosing particular common patterns of student thinking and development in a subject-matter domain," "setting long- and short-term learning goals for students," and "providing oral and written feedback to students."[81]

Smack in the middle of the list of high-leverage practices—at #10—is "building respectful relationships with students." In explaining the benefits and behaviors associated with this practice, the TeachingWorks team observes that

> teachers increase the likelihood that students will engage and persist in school when they establish positive, individual relationships with them. Techniques for doing this include greeting students positively every day, having frequent, brief, "check in" conversations with students to demonstrate care and interest, and following up with students who are experiencing difficult or special personal situations.

A separate item on the list—"Learning about students' cultural, religious, family, intellectual and personal experiences and resources for use in instruction"—adds an emphasis on what we have previously described as "knowing" students. Among other things, this practice requires sensitivity to students' cultural context, an understanding of "the topics and issues that interest individual students and groups of students," and an awareness of "what is happening in students' personal lives."

TeachingWorks is not alone in framing relationship-building and getting to know students as core competencies that can be explicitly taught, practiced, and mastered by beginning teachers. In an extremely influential 2009 paper, a group of researchers led by Pam Grossman pointed out that other professions train beginners in a repertoire of well-specified relational practices and techniques. The paper examined and compared the professional preparation of teachers, clergy, and clinical psychologists—three professions in which "practice depends heavily on the quality of human relationships between practitioners and their clients." Noting that "learning how to build and maintain productive professional relationships with the people in one's care is no simple matter," Grossman and colleagues criticize the tendency to "assume that this is a natural rather than learned capacity."[82] That assumption, they imply, is less prevalent in other fields than it is in teaching; other fields, at least, have well-developed methods for helping novices learn specific relational routines. For instance, Grossman and colleagues point to a series of classes they observed in clinical psychology programs, in which "professors

broke down the process of building [a therapeutic] alliance [with clients] into multiple steps and then focused on the skills required within each of these steps or stages."[83]

We might suppose that advocates of a greater systemic emphasis on fostering positive student-teacher relationships would welcome this recognition that relational practices are learnable—and that they lie at the core of what beginning teachers must learn during their professional training. We might likewise expect that proponents of a stronger relational focus in schools would be encouraged by the push to specify to beginners exactly how teachers' relational work is accomplished. Many who believe that "you have to have a relationship first" must surely be cheered the prospect of pre-service teachers rehearsing concrete relational strategies within a supportive setting.

Yet it is interesting to consider what someone like Nel Noddings might think of the "core practices" approach to teacher education. Noddings, I believe, would not be enthusiastic about a model that represents relationship-building as one among several core practices that help effective teachers engage students academically. As we saw in the last chapter, Noddings views caring relationships not as a means toward the end of student achievement, but as the primary aim of schooling. Requiring beginning teachers to master specific relational strategies will hardly bring about the transformation Noddings seeks in the organizing purpose of schools. Moreover, Noddings might object to the notion that it is possible to translate the ideal of caring for students into a set of techniques that can be prescribed and practiced. She stresses that "there is no recipe for caring." It would be absurd, she argues, to say "'Aha! This fellow needs care. Now, let's see—here are the seven steps I must follow.' Caring is a way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviors."[84]

To be fair, proponents of the core practices model don't claim that the work of establishing good relationships with students can be reduced to so many techniques. As Forzani notes, the current movement to focus teacher education on high-leverage practices conceives of teaching as "a composite of technique, analysis, interpretation, and judgment."[85] Despite its emphasis on equipping beginners with a set of technical routines to manage the more predictable aspects of instruction, the core practices model assumes that unpredictable situations demanding professional judgment will arise in the midst of those routines. In fact, the aspiration is to identify a set of routines that will open up,

rather than close off, opportunities for improvisation.[86] Thus, for instance, teachers who consistently apply a set of learned skills for engaging students in routine "check-in" conversations might be in a better position to respond creatively to the particularities of a student's circumstances. The theory is that well-practiced formulas for entering into the conversation and managing its predictable junctures may ultimately make a less formulaic response to the student more likely.

Given her own belief that "caring in *every* domain implies competence,"[87] Noddings may well see value in teachers' learning to competently enact the routines TeachingWorks prescribes for "building respectful relationships with students." She might still worry, though, that a program requiring the implementation of particular routines—including routines for relationship-building—may promote fidelity to the formula over faithful attention to students as persons. This is Noddings's attitude generally toward the many procedures, methods, techniques, and templates that teacher educators press upon beginning teachers. She concedes that these tools of the trade may have their uses. But "to insist that teachers actually use them and to evaluate teachers on their use" sends the message that orthodox practice can substitute for caring relations. And for Noddings, this is exactly the wrong message to send:

> The object of teacher education from a caring perspective is not to produce people who will do their duty as it is prescribed or faithfully use the means deemed likely to achieve discrete learning goals but, rather, to produce people who will make autonomous decisions for the sake of their students. [88]

This means offering "ideas and strategies (fads and all) as material to be analyzed, discussed, critiqued, and considered" by prospective teachers, while ultimately allowing them to "reject entirely some of the methods to which we expose them on the grounds that they violate their own ethical sense of what it means to teach."

Of course, in any other profession, the notion that novices should be empowered to "reject entirely" the methods prescribed by experts might be regarded as absurd. But one marker of just how differently Noddings thinks about these things is that she actively calls for the "deprofessionalization" of teaching.[89] If nothing else, her use of that term is brave. Nearly all the teacher educators I've met are united in the goal of "professionalizing" teaching; to them, "deprofessionalization" is a bad word connoting the view that teaching is a natural rather than acquired skill, that anyone knowledgeable

in a subject can teach it, or that teaching shouldn't require a professional license. The whole movement to represent teacher education as a professional training program organized around the acquisition of specialized competencies is often framed as a form of resistance against the perceived threat of deprofessionalization.

But to Noddings, deprofessionalizing teaching means something else. It certainly "does not mean a reduction of emphasis on quality, nor a loss of pride and distinction" for teachers. Nor does it necessarily mean stripping colleges and universities of their role in teacher education. It does, however, mean

> an attempt to eliminate the special language that separates [teachers] from other educators in the community (especially parents), a reduction in the narrow specialization that carries with it reduced contact with individual children, and an increase in the spirit of caring—that spirit that many refer to as the "maternal attitude."[90]

I don't take Noddings to be saying that there is *no* specialized knowledge or skill that teachers might need to acquire through professional training. Rather, her point is that the field of teacher education is currently characterized by too much, rather than too little, emphasis on developing some special expertise that distinguishes teachers from non-teachers. From Noddings's perspective, beginners need to learn to root their work not in a professional knowledge base, but in an ethic that pervades human life. What teachers need is a stronger—not weaker—sense of the connection between their professional role and the ideals they strive for generally in their social relationships.[91] If so, then a programmatic focus on rehearsing specialized relational practices may be at best tangential, and at worst counter-productive, to the larger goal of helping prospective teachers become caring people.

So then how might teacher education better serve that goal? What form of professional preparation (if any) would be consistent with Noddings's call to deprofessionalize teaching? Noddings has addressed these questions in various writings over the course of a couple decades, sketching an alternative vision for teacher education in fairly general terms. Her basic claim is that if the goal is to produce caring people, "we [teacher educators] approach our goal by living with those whom we teach in a caring community."[92] This means that schools of education must become, first and foremost, places where prospective teachers can experience and practice an ethos of care.

This is not a matter of indoctrinating new teachers to believe that "care" is an attribute of effective teaching or showing them exactly how they might care for their future students; it is a matter of re-examining the culture of ed schools through the lens of an ethic of care. Noddings is troubled, for instance, by a culture in which teacher educators proudly declare that "their first duty is to the children of the land." [93] The trouble with that noble-sounding declaration, she explains, is that it can lead to "harsh" or uncaring treatment of pre-service teachers by instructors who profess to care more about the hypothetical children their own students will soon teach. Noddings worries that teachers trained in such an environment may internalize the habit of valuing abstractions like success or achievement over responsiveness to the particular people in their care.

For Noddings, then, the first step toward improving teacher education is to treat "young people learning to teach" as "the direct objects of caring."[94] She is mindful of making this point against the backdrop of criticism accusing teacher educators of demanding too little of prospective teachers; some critics, she realizes, tend to suspect that caring amounts to coddling. Yet Noddings sees no real tension between maintaining an ethos of care in ed schools and maintaining exacting standards for beginning teachers. After all, when teacher educators "act as models of caring," they "may also model a host of other desirable qualities: meticulous preparation, lively presentation, critical thinking, appreciative listening, constructive evaluation, genuine curiosity." Noddings is willing to entertain proposals to increase the rigor of selection criteria, academic instruction, and graduation requirements for teacher preparation programs. But she insists that we must "look at each of these admirable goals and ask what they mean, how they serve the purposes of community and personal growth, and how best we can achieve them without betraying the persons to whom we will remain faithful." Her point is that schools of education—like K-12 schools—must constantly resist the temptation to turn rigor into an idol we serve at the expense of a higher ethical ideal.

Noddings also seems to recommend a shift in the curriculum of teacher preparation programs, though it is necessary to read between the lines to ascertain exactly what she has in mind. Her position on longstanding proposals to eliminate or reduce much of the specialized coursework focused on pedagogy in favor of more coursework in the liberal arts and sciences can best be described as ambivalent. On one hand, she is

attracted to the emphasis on the importance of teachers' content knowledge, since she sees a broad and deep knowledge base as essential to teachers' capacity to establish caring relationships with students. She argues that "teachers have to know their subjects so well that they can spot and encourage promising approaches in their students and not be overcome, out of ignorance, by the need to control."[95] Because the imagination of deeply knowledgeable teachers isn't limited by any set of standardized objectives, they can respond more supportively to student needs, interests, and talents that push the boundaries of the prescribed curriculum.

Nonetheless, Noddings remains wary of proposals that would give over the preparation of teachers to the liberal arts and science departments of universities. Her main concern is not about the dangers of producing teachers who lack specialized pedagogical expertise, but about the dangers of producing teachers who are defined by their specialized disciplinary expertise. Contrary to theorists who believe that the teacher's role is to induct students into the distinctive patterns of thought and inquiry that characterize the academic disciplines, Noddings wants all teachers to help their students "pursue wisdom" within, across, and beyond the disciplines.[96] She does not want them to feel constrained by the disciplinary identities that academic departments work so hard to instill. Like parents, mentors, and other caregivers, "teachers should be willing to discuss matters on which they have had no specific training—all the matters pertaining to human existence—and help students to create and learn powerful methods of investigation."[97] Of course, teachers must know enough to draw on disciplinary modes of inquiry and share them with students as appropriate. But teachers must also be willing to recognize and appreciate ways of engaging with intellectual content that fall outside the mode of the particular disciplines in which they've been trained. They need to see math and history and the rest not as self-contained thought-worlds, but as points of connection to the various things that they and their students might care about. In principle, perhaps, that is exactly what a liberal arts education is supposed to be about. Yet Noddings suspects that most university departments aren't organized to foster the kind of wide-ranging curiosity and intellectual flexibility that caring teachers need.

So we can summarize Noddings's position as follows: teacher should have much more content-knowledge, but typical college courses in the academic disciplines may not

be ideal environments for gaining that knowledge. One possible implication of this position is that schools of education should take responsibility for teaching content courses to pre-service teachers, rather than delegating that responsibility to the various departments in the university. Prospective teachers would study literature, math, history, science, philosophy, composition, and so on in classes led by ed school faculty. Schools of education would essentially become miniature liberal arts colleges within the university. The courses they offer could be organized around the standard school subjects, thematic topics, faculty and student interests, big questions, or types of experience. Regardless of how they were organized, the aim would be to help prospective teachers form caring relationships with their peers, with their instructors, with objects and ideas, and with their future students. The teacher preparation program would aspire to become, in effect, a living model of a vibrant community organized around the study of subject-matter.

Reorganizing ed schools as sites of content learning for prospective teachers would be a radical step.[98] But modest versions of the proposal could be adopted on an experimental basis with relatively little risk. Perhaps to start with, a school of education could offer a few content-based courses (i.e. courses that aren't mainly about education) and require pre-service teachers to enroll in one or two of their choosing. Alternatively, ed school faculty could partner with faculty in the liberal arts departments to develop and teach some of the content-based courses that pre-service teachers are required to take, using those courses as opportunities to model caring community.

An even more modest proposal that Noddings could possibly get behind is detailed in a 2013 paper by Morva McDonald, Michael Bowman, and Kate Brayko. They describe a program at the University of Washington that placed pre-service elementary teachers in "community-based organizations" for the express purpose of helping them learn to build relationships with "diverse youth" and their families. In the first academic quarter of the program, teaching candidates spend sixty hours working with children in community organizations ranging "from YMCAs to neighborhood centers to culturally focused organizations." The theory was that since "caring relationships are at the center" of these organizations' work, the field placements would allow teaching candidates to focus on the "relational practices of teaching."[99] In

particular, the placements would help them "learn how to develop knowledge and understanding of students' lives out of school, how to engage with parents and families, and how to connect with others involved with improving the educational opportunities for particular children and youth."

Despite framing the community placements as opportunities for beginners to learn specific "relational practices," the idea of immersing new teachers in community-based organizations reflects the spirit of Noddings's call for new forms of teacher education that foster an ethic of care. Part of the point of starting beginners in an out-of-school context is to help them see the continuity between their role as teachers and the role of other caregivers in the child's life. These placements are supposed to work against the tendency to underestimate the learning that occurs out of school; indeed, they frame the kind of caring interactions that occur informally in community-based organizations as models of what *could* occur in school. Whether we call it "deprofessionalization" or not, the logic behind the community-based placements suggests that the relational work of teaching is in critical ways akin to work that normally takes place outside of teachers' usual professional setting.

McDonald and colleagues point out, though, that what teaching candidates actually get out of these placements varies. It depends on how well the host organization is organized and the quality of the care children receive there. It depends on the teaching candidates' preconceptions and attitudes toward the placement. And it depends on how their experiences in the placement are processed and framed through accompanying coursework. Even under the best of circumstances, we might wonder whether the experiences teaching candidates have in these community-based placements are powerful enough to influence the way they will cope with the dynamics that tend to strain student-teacher relationships in schools.

This last point returns us to the apprehension we began with—that innovation in teacher education might be a relatively weak lever of school reform. Perhaps for this reason, proposals to overhaul teacher preparation programs sometimes read like visions of what these programs could look like *after* we've already changed the schools. For example, in arguing that we should avoid thinking of teacher education as training in a highly specialized set of practices, Noddings offers this observation:

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> Many of the skills we associate with teaching are, if they are skills at all, skills whose need is induced by the peculiar nature of modern schooling. If we were to change that structure, many of the skills we now underscore would become unnecessary. Many so-called "management" or "disciplinary" skills would be unnecessary in schools organized for caring.[100]

Perhaps. But the key phrase is "would be." If Noddings is right, then schools are not presently "organized for caring." Maybe that will change, but in the meantime teacher educators face a dilemma: should we prepare beginners to teach in schools as they are or as we might wish them to be? As far as I can tell, the only way of managing this dilemma is to try in some way to do both at once. Noddings's aim, perhaps, is just to tilt the balance slightly in favor of more aspirational approaches.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Besides the three we've just examined, there are of course countless other strategies for reshaping the institutional context that shapes student-teacher relationships. We might allow groups of students to keep the same teacher for periods longer than a year, a practice sometimes called "looping" (because the teacher follows the students through several years of schooling before looping back to the begin the sequence with a new group). We might abolish grading, on the grounds that teachers' obligation to assign grades tends to dominate and distort their relationships with students. We might establish more youth apprenticeship programs that pair students with adult mentors, thus expanding the concept of student-teacher relationships beyond the boundaries of schools. We might consider a drastic change in teacher compensation—say, doubling teacher pay—as a way of dramatically enhancing the interpersonal capabilities of the teaching force. We could go on and on. Because there is no feature of the institutional context of schooling that does not influence the quality of young people's relationships with adults, the possibilities for modifying that context to improve those relationships are boundless.

As I listed some of the possibilities, you might have found yourself wondering whether any of these strategies have been tried and tested and, if so, whether they "work." That sort of wondering is inevitable. For a while now, the public conversation around school reform has been fixated on "data-driven" decision-making and "evidence-

based" policy. Claims that "the research" has proven this or that strategy "effective" show up regularly in the conversation. In our own discussion, I've alluded to a handful of studies that measure the effects of student-teacher relationships—or organizational strategies for improving them—on outcomes like student engagement and achievement. I've also referenced some case studies that attempt to explain how student-teacher relationships of varying quality form in particular contexts. It is time now to take a closer look at these genres of research.

Chapter Notes

[1] *See, e.g.*, Phillippo, 2013.

[2] Kozol, 2007, p. 19.

[3] Noddings, 1986.

[4] Lee & Smith, 1995, pp. 242-244. Lee and Smith cite Bryk & Driscoll (1988) as the first to "articulate the theory [of bureaucratic vs. communal organizations] in a form that applies to schools" (p. 243).

[5] Lee & Smith, 1995, p. 245; Raywid, 1998.

[6] U.S. Department of Education, 2001.

[7] Kahne et al., 2008, p. 284.

[8] *Id.*, p. 287. More generally, this paragraph is based on pp. 285-287.

[9] *Id.*, p. 284.

[10] *Id.*, p. 299.

[11] *Id.*, p. 283. *See also* Davis et al., 2014.

[12] *See, e.g.*, Antrop-Gonzalez & DeJesus, 2006, p. 410.

[13] *See* Mac Iver, 1990.

[14] *Id.*, p. 458.

[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id.*, pp. 458-459.

[17] McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010, p. 5.

[18] For one typology of middle school advisory programs, see Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1997.

[19] Mac Iver, 1990, pp. 458-59.

[20] Shulkind & Foote, 2015.

[21] *Id.*, p. 25.

[22] *Id.*, pp. 24-25.

[23] *Id.*, p. 21 (long string of internal citations omitted).

[24] Neville, Hutchison, & McCann, 2015, pp. 2-3. The quotations in the next several paragraphs, explaining the theory and design of the Advocacy model, are all drawn from pp. 2-9.

[25] McCann, 2015, p. 67.

[26] *Id.*

[27] Neville, Hutchison, & McCann, 2015, pp. 7-8.

[28] *Id.*, p. 6.

[29] *Id.*, p. 4.

[30] *Id.*

[31] *Id.*, p. 3.

[32] McCann & Schmidt, 2015, p. 34 (citing Ocean, 2000, p. 16).

[33] Phillippo (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with 34 students at the three schools. The participants in her study were all non-white and low-income, and they were all identified by their advisors as having a history of disruptive or risky behavior, or living with caregivers other than parents. Phillippo notes that "this selection strategy created a limited pool of participants, but also enabled me to talk with youth who are often presumed to need teacher support and caring." (p. 448).

[34] *Id.*, p. 456-457.

[35] *Id.*, p. 457.

[36] *Id.*

[37] McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010, p. 11.

[38] *Id.*, citing Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox (1997).

[39] Neville, Hutchison, & McCann, 2015, p. 6.

[40] Hutchison, 2015, p. 48.

[41] *Id.*, p. 45.

[42] *Id.* Hutchison attributes the phrase "passionate affinity space" to Gee & Hayes (2011).

[43] Hutchison, 2015, p. 38.

[44] *Id.*, p. 49.

[45] *Id.*

[46] *See* Galassi, Gulledge, & Cox, 1997, pp. 330-332.

[47] *See, e.g.*, Dewey, 1899.

[48] A 1991 paper by Marshall Smith and Jennifer O'Day, titled "Systemic School Reform" provides a thorough elaboration of the framework that has guided the standards-based movement. The movement scored its most (in)famous legislative victory in 2002 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. It is important to remember that while NCLB is now routinely blamed for declining teacher and student morale, the law enjoyed extraordinary levels of bipartisan support when Congress passed it in 2001 (by a vote of 384-45 in the House and 91-8 in the Senate). And despite the recent repeal of some of NCLB's standardized testing requirements—prompted in part by a growing public backlash against testing— standards-based accountability remains by many accounts the dominant paradigm of school reform in the United States. The shift toward the new Common Core State Standards, for instance, reflects the hope that better (state-mandated) standards will produce better outcomes.

[49] *See* Meier, 2002, pp. 160-172; Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002.

[50] *See* Meier, 2000.

[51] Meier, 2002, p. 9. The quotations in this paragraph and the next are drawn from pp. 9-13.

[52] Meier, 2000, p. 20.

[53] *Id.*, p. 15.

[54] *See* Snell, 1992; Ouchi, 1979. Behavior and output controls are two types of what Ouchi called "bureaucratic control systems." Snell labels a third type of bureaucratic control "input controls," which refer to formal systems for the selection and training of workers. Teacher licensure and professional development requirements are classic examples of input controls commonly employed by school systems.

[55] *But see* Peurach & Glazer, 2012, arguing that the mandated use of highly prescriptive instructional methods need not necessarily preclude users from adapting the template based on local conditions and their own professional insights.

[56] *See, e.g.*, Shedd & Bacharach, 1991, p. 61 ("Therefore, teachers tend to have more flexibility when their responsibilities are defined in terms of expected outcomes or objectives, rather than tasks or procedures."); U.S. Dept. of Education, 2002, p. 20 (arguing that standards-based reform is "based on what former Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander calls the great 'horse trade.' Schools are accepting greater accountability for results in return for greater flexibility and control.").

[57] *See, e.g.*, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Schoen & Fusarelli, 2008; Au, 2011.

[58] Meier, 2000, p. 23.

[59] *Id.*, p. 27.

[60] *See* Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Labaree, 2000.

[61] Cottam, 2015, p. 138.

[62] *See* Chubb & Moe, 1988.

[63] *See, e.g.,* Noddings 1992/2005, pp. *xx-xxiii*. Most of the objections raised in this paragraph are drawn from Noddings's discussion of school privatization; others have been mentioned in discussions I've participated in over the years.

[64] Meier, 2002, p. 176.

[65] *See, e.g.*, Noddings, 1992/2005, p. *xxii* (characterizing education as a "public good," rather than a "consumer good)"; Meier, 2002, pp. 176-177. *See also* Labaree, 1997.

[66] Meier, 2002, p. 176.

[67] *Id.*, p. 177.

[68] *Id.*, p. 176.

[69] *Id.*, p. 172-173.

[70] The paragraphs that follow are based on Meier's account in *id.*, pp. 166-170, and the quotations are drawn from those pages. As Meier explains, her team's effort to create this system-within-a-system in New York City was funded by the Annenberg Foundation as part of a $500 million grant program known as the Annenberg Challenge. According to the Foundation's website, the Challenge "was designed to unite the resources and ideas of those committed to increasing the effectiveness of public schooling. Eighteen locally designed Challenge projects operated in 35 states, funding 2,400 public schools that served more than 1.5 million students and 80,000 teachers." For a discussion of lessons from the Annenberg Challenge initiatives in Chicago and San Francisco, see Murphy & Datnow, 2003.

[71] Grossman, 2008, p. 10. Grossman cites a series of books dating to 1949 in which "critics accuse teacher educators for failing to produce effective teachers" (p. 13).

[72] Zeichner, 2006, p. 327.

[73] Zeichner calls this the "deregulation agenda," *id.* *See also* Grossman, 2008, p. 13 (citing U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

[74] *See* Layton, 2014.

[75] Westervelt, 2015.

[76] *Id.*

[77] Brown, 2016.

[78] Forzani, 2014, p. 357 (internal citations omitted).

[79] *Id.*, p. 358.

[80] *Id.* Forzani acknowledges that the broad idea of focusing on well-defined teaching practices isn't new; it has surfaced in various forms at intervals through the history of teacher education. She points to a movement known as "competency-based teacher education," which was widely influential in the 1970s, as the most recent forerunner to the current core practices model. Like the contemporary core practices model, the competency-based approach "aspired to structure teacher education around a set of precise learning objectives ('competencies'), defined in assessable, behavioral terms." However, Forzani argues that the lists of hundreds of teaching tasks that structured competency-based teacher education in the 1970s reflected a somewhat different perspective on good teaching than the much slimmer lists of "high-leverage practices" that form the core of today's models. She suggests that as compared with representations of effective teaching several decades ago, current conceptions of quality teaching tend to represent interactions between students and teachers as "more complex" and less "mechanical." Though beginning teachers might be expected to master certain prescribed routines for interacting with students, current approaches emphasize the unpredictability of students' expressions of their ideas and the importance of improvising responses that take student thinking seriously (pp. 364-465; *see also* Zeichner, 2012).

[81] TeachingWorks, 2016.

[82] Grossman *et al.*, 2009, p. 2057.

[83] *Id.*, pp. 2073-2074. *See also*, Grossman *et al.*, 2007.

[84] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 17. *See also* O'Connor, 2008, p. 119. In introducing her qualitative study of teachers who exhibit "caring behavior," O'Connor argues that professional competencies or standards—including those focused on relational aspects of teaching—fail to account for the critical role played by teachers' identities as caring people. She suggests that because teaching involves an emotionally-driven investment in and understanding of others, "the nature of teaching cannot be expressed within 'technical competencies,'" which "by their nature… are designed to prescribe, define, and regulate aspects of a professional role in a rationalist manner."

[85] Forzani, 2014, p. 365.

[86] For more general accounts of how formal organizational routines can lead to improvisation, see Feldman & Pentland, 2003 and Peurach & Glazer, 2012.

[87] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 175.

[88] Noddings, 1986, p. 504.

[89] Noddings, 1984/2013, pp. 188, 197-198.

[90] *Id.*, p. 197.

[91] Writing about pedagogical practice in post-secondary settings, Clegg and Rowland (2010) make a similar point about the limits of the rhetoric of professionalism. They argue that the professionalization of university teaching has entailed the reduction of widespread personal values like kindness and care to standards specifying the minimum of "due care" required of professionals. What is needed, they say, is a recommitment to "lay normativity—those things that matter to us as human actors." They suggest that "lay normativity" is "subversive" of modern professional culture in that the behaviors that flow from it "cannot be regulated or prescribed."

[92] Noddings, 1986, p. 502.

[93] *Id.*, pp. 502-503.

[94] Noddings, 1986, p. 503. All of the quotations in this paragraph are drawn from the same page.

[95] Noddings, 1992/2005, p. 178.

[96] *Id.*

[97] *Id.*

[98] Here are just a few of the many questions the proposal raises: Are ed school faculty members qualified to teach the kind of content courses I have in mind? Are they willing to teach such courses? Would the kind of curriculum I've described meet state standards for university-based programs authorized to certify

new teachers? Would it satisfy accrediting bodies? And how would students feel about taking content courses within the ed school? Would reconstituting teacher preparation programs as cutting-edge liberal arts programs help reverse the trend of declining enrollment, or accelerate it? Finally, if the goal is to ensure that pre-service teachers receive the best possible liberal arts education, then why assign that responsibility to ed schools? If the concern is that liberal arts departments offer poor pedagogical models, then why not focus on reforming *them*?

[99] McDonald, Bowman, & Brayko, 2013, p. 3.

[100] Noddings, 1984/2013, p. 198.

Chapter 3

Learning from research on student-teacher relationships

Every year, American universities, philanthropies, and government agencies spend more than a billion dollars on social science research.[1] The expected return on this investment is knowledge that will inform the design and implementation of public programs and services, including public schooling. The expectation, in other words, is that the products of social science research will be useful and that policymakers and practitioners will in fact use them. In recent years, this expectation has been expressed through slogans calling for more "evidence-based policy and practice." As a National Research Council report explains, these slogans carry the assumption that we can achieve "better and more defensible policy decisions by grounding them in the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of the best available scientific evidence."[2]

Ironically, though, the premise that social science research can improve social policy is supported more strongly by intuition than by research. The NRC committee observed that "the normative claim that policy should be grounded in an evidence base 'is itself based on surprisingly weak evidence.'"[3] In fact, social scientists (and their sponsors) have long worried that the vast quantities of research they produced were not yielding the anticipated benefits. These worries have spawned a distinct research agenda to study "research use," with the goal of understanding how communities of policymakers and practitioners interact with social scientific knowledge and how they might do so more fruitfully.[4]

Diagnoses of the problem—and suggested solutions—vary considerably. There have been proposals to represent findings in more user-friendly formats and to strengthen

the channels for disseminating research products.[5] An alternative approach would engage policymakers and practitioners in the research process itself, positioning them as co-producers—rather than mere users—of social science.[6] Some proposals focus on bolstering the trustworthiness of the social scientific enterprise by raising the standards of methodological rigor for published research. Of course, what counts as methodological rigor remains hotly contested, as do the respective strengths, limitations, and appropriate uses of various "quantitative" and "qualitative" methods.

The depth of the disagreements over what counts as good, high-quality, or useful social science suggests that we should approach the abundant research on student-teacher relationships with a critical eye. But approach it we must. In an era marked by the valorization of "evidence-based policy," conversations about student-teacher relationships as a lever of school reform will sooner or later lead to the question, "Well, what does the research show?" In this chapter, I take that question as the starting point for a discussion of the "usefulness" of several different genres of research on student-teacher relationships.

My aim is to provide readers with just a taste of the research that has come out of some of the major methodological traditions. The research genres we will explore run the gamut from statistical analyses and meta-analyses to case studies based on mostly qualitative data. Our discussion will by no means encompass the full range of methodological diversity that characterizes modern social science, but I hope it will illustrate some of the strengths and limitations that distinguish—and cut across—different methodologies. To that end, I will offer close readings of a few varied examples of research on student-teacher relationships, from the perspective of the practitioners and policy-makers for whose use they were intended. In doing so, I will treat research products not as (mere) repositories of verified knowledge, but as socially constructed artifacts reflecting contestable assumptions about how users will interact with and learn from them. Our job is to critically examine those assumptions.

Although we will remain engaged with research that highlights relational aspects of teaching, our discussion will focus more on understanding the methodological issues surrounding that research than on reaching substantive conclusions about "what the research shows." In fact, I will offer no new bottom-line assessments of the state of the

evidence, even as we consider some previous attempts to do just that. Instead, I hope that the experience of grappling with concrete instances of different kinds of research will equip readers to navigate, in their own ways, the vast terrain of available literature. With that goal in mind, let's begin by diving into some of the literature that addresses questions of whether and how much student-teacher relationships really matter.

"The research tells us…"

One of the teachers I spoke with at MEC worried that relationships will continue to get short shrift from school administrators and policy-makers because the contribution they make to academic growth is "hard to measure quantitatively." Although he may be right about the difficulty of measuring these things, many a researcher has certainly tried. Dozens of studies have attempted to quantify the link between the quality of student-teacher relationships (as measured, for instance, by students' perceptions of teacher caring) and various outcomes of schooling (e.g., engagement and academic achievement).

These studies are in some ways a diverse lot. They employ different measures of relationship quality, based perhaps on differing conceptions of how relationships influence learning. Some infer relationship quality from teacher reports, though most seem to rely on ratings provided by students. Some ask students to rate teachers directly, while others ask them to rate their experience of the school or classroom climate. Some of the studies focus on elementary schools, while others focus on secondary schools. Some studies compare schools, others compare classrooms, and others compare individual student-teacher dyads. Some studies report the results of experimental interventions designed to strengthen social bonds within the school, while others use datasets to track naturally-occurring relationships among variables.

Someone interested in knowing what all this research shows may be forgiven for not wanting to read through—and make sense of—more than a hundred studies, some of which can be quite technical. They might turn instead to one or another summary, review, or synthesis of the literature, such as an article published in 2000 by Karen Osterman, titled "Students' need for belonging in the school community." As these

things go, Osterman's article carries considerable authority and prestige. It was published in the *Review of Education Research*, a prestigious academic journal affiliated with the nation's largest association of educational researchers. Based on the standard measure of "impact" on the field, the *Review of Educational Research* currently ranks first among the 224 scholarly journals devoted to education. As of this writing, Osterman's paper has been cited in over 1,600 publications in the Google Scholar database. Though some might consider the paper somewhat outdated, it has been cited by over 250 publications since 2015 alone.

Osterman's goals seem to be in line with what Margaret Eisenhart describes as a common purpose of research summaries: to "collect and organize the results of numerous previous studies so that we know 'what we have already learned.'"[7] Specifically, Osterman is interested in summarizing what we've learned about the link between students' "experience of relatedness or belongingness" and "outcomes of particular significance in school settings," including motivation, participation, academic self-concept, and academic achievement.[8] Under that broad umbrella, she seems especially interested in studies that test the hypothesis that teachers influence academic outcomes by relating to students in ways that satisfy (or fail to satisfy) their need to belong. She is also interested in identifying some of the organizational structures that influence the quality of students' relationships within the school.

Though much of the research Osterman summarizes is quantitative, she characterizes her own methods of collecting, analyzing, and summarizing studies as "an ongoing process guided by principles of qualitative research." She likens the process to that of "a detective, developing hunches, pursuing leads, and looking for evidence, until a picture begins to emerge."[9] Through this process, Osterman claims to have assembled a "relatively inclusive" collection of studies that measure "students' perspectives about their own individual or collective experience of support and involvement, in home and school settings, with family, teachers, classes, or schools."[10] Ultimately, she encapsulates the picture that emerges from this collection of studies with a series of broad generalizations about what the research shows.

"The research tells us," she claims, "that the experience of belongingness is associated with important psychological processes" that afford students "inner

resources," which "in turn predict engagement and performance" in school.[11] Though Osterman conceptualizes students' sense of belonging as an effect of interacting relationships with peers, family, and teachers, her summary of the research leads her to conclude that "teacher support has the most direct impact on student engagement."[12] Moreover, "research establishes that there are instructional practices that can influence students' sense of community… In general, interpersonal, instructional, and organizational strategies that support positive interaction among students and other members of the school community should enhance students' sense of community."[13]

At this level of generality, Osterman's conclusions may seem so obvious as to be inarguable. Nonetheless, it's worth pausing to ask whether the studies Osterman summarizes really do warrant her general claims about what the research "tells us" or what the research "establishes." I am not questioning Osterman's assertions that she has assembled a "relatively inclusive" sample of relevant studies or that these studies are broadly consistent in the findings they report. But even if we accept those assertions, Osterman's generalizations about what these studies actually show—as opposed to what they purport to show—can be only as well-warranted as the findings of the studies themselves. Thus, if we are to assess the validity of Osterman's conclusions, we have to take a closer look at the primary research findings on which they are based.

So let's dig into a series of studies that feature prominently in her discussion. Osterman cites repeatedly to studies that emerged from the Child Development Project (CDP), a research collaboration launched in the 1980s to support elementary school teachers in "creating classroom environments that children will experience as caring communities."[14] The CDP intervention was designed "to create a general atmosphere and to transform relationships among students as well as between students and teachers."[15] Teachers in program schools received training in several distinct practices, including a classroom management approach styled "developmental discipline" that aims to provide students with "meaningful opportunities for autonomy, self-direction, and exertion of influence in the classroom."[16]

In the first study of the project's outcomes, researchers collected data on students' subjective "sense of community" and various academic "outcomes" over a period of several years.   They then compared the measures of students who attended CDP program

schools with the same measures of students who attended comparison schools. According to Osterman, an analysis of

> a sample of 743 students in grades 4-6 found that measures of the sense of community were higher for students in program schools than for those in the comparison schools each year. These increases in sense of community, in turn, were associated with increases in various student outcomes including intrinsic academic motivation.[17]

Osterman evidently regards this study as a solid contribution to the evidence base supporting the claims that (1) the experience of belongingness predicts academic engagement and performance, and (2) well-designed interventions can increase students' sense of belonging.

A close look at the CDP studies, however, raises several methodological and logical issues that might limit what we can actually infer from their findings. For instance, one obvious limitation arises from the CDP's exclusive focus on elementary schools; there is no basis for extrapolating the study's findings to students in middle or high school. In itself, this limitation does not invalidate Osterman's conclusions about what "the research tells us." After all, she summarizes studies of young people in every age group, sometimes attending carefully to age-based differences. But even if there is some evidence from across age groups (and other demographic variables) for Osterman's broad claims, we might worry that the breadth of those claims washes out some of the variation in how different students experience belonging, and how that experience shapes and is shaped by their school experience.

A second issue concerns the validity and reliability of the measures the researchers used to assess constructs like "sense of community," "intrinsic motivation," "engagement," and "achievement." How well do the survey instruments capture the experience of "community" or "engagement"? To what extent does "engagement" in school predict learning (variously defined) and other valuable outcomes, as it is hypothesized to do? Does it matter whether we are measuring "higher order" learning versus other forms of achievement? Whom should we be asking to rate students' "sense of community" and "intrinsic motivation": students, teachers, parents, or all of the above? How well would all of these ratings line up? And at a given age, how much do students' ratings of their belonging and academic engagement vary day-to-day? How much insight

do these ratings give us into their experience over longer periods? Osterman alludes to some of these questions occasionally throughout her discussion, and some of the CDP studies she summarizes address them head-on. But it's not clear if or how Osterman's analysis of these measurement issues might have influenced the weight she assigned to the various findings she summarizes.

A third issue raised by the CDP studies is among the most fraught in the social sciences: under what circumstances can we infer causation from a correlation between variables? As every statistics student is taught, "correlation does not imply causation." That is, variables can move together in a predictable fashion, even though one doesn't necessarily cause the other. A classic example asks us to suppose that swimming pool drownings are more common on hotter days. Our theory probably wouldn't be that hot temperatures *cause* drownings, but that hotter temperatures cause greater use of swimming pools, which create more opportunities for drownings.

In describing the CDP findings, Osterman is careful not to use the language of causation. She says only that students in program schools rated their sense of community more highly than students in comparison schools and that this difference was "associated" with improvements in variables like intrinsic motivation and liking of school. But the implication is that it was the intervention that caused the change in sense of community and that it was the change in sense of community that caused the improvements on student outcome measures. And indeed, Osterman argues that the design of the CDP studies, "while not establishing causality, provides a strong case for causal inference."[18] Unlike "correlational" and "cross-sectional" studies linking students' perceptions of their school relationships with school outcomes, the CDP researchers traced the outcomes of a particular intervention over time and compared those outcomes to identical measures of comparison schools. Because program schools were randomly selected to receive the intervention from among a pool of schools that expressed interest, it seems plausible to attribute any differences between program schools and comparison schools to the intervention.

Nonetheless, it isn't totally clear whether the intervention influenced, say, student motivation by increasing their sense of community, or whether it influenced students' sense of community by increasing their motivation. Perhaps the most likely

interpretation is that the causal relationship between sense of community and measures of student engagement is bidirectional: each influences and reinforces the other. Just as feeling a greater sense of belonging in school might result in greater academic engagement, students who are more academically engaged (for whatever reason) might elicit more affirming responses from teacher and peers, resulting in a greater sense of belonging. The CDP studies are consistent with this interpretation, yet they frame variables like motivation, engagement, and achievement as outcomes (rather than causes) of students' experience of the classroom as a caring community.

Even if we were inclined to accept this framing of cause-and-effect in the CDP studies, a separate issue arises when we consider the *size* of the effects reported by the researchers. When researchers say that the difference between two groups or the correlation between two variables is "significant," they are normally referring to statistical significance. This just means that given the strength of the relationship and the size of the sample, it is highly improbable that the results of the analysis are a fluke that can be explained by sampling error. When samples are quite large, then, even a very small effect will be statistically significant because the chances of a fluky sample are so low. In fact, some statistically significant effects will be so small as to be *practically* insignificant. For instance, a one millimeter difference in human height could be a statistically significant correlate of some other variable—and reported as a "significant" effect by researchers—even though it may make no real difference in a typical person's life. In the case of the CDP studies, Osterman notes that the researchers deemed most of the effects they found "relatively small."[19] She does not, however, discuss the implications of this caveat or how it might have figured into her ultimate conclusions about what "the research tells us."

A final issue concerns the distribution of the effects within the CDP studies. The average effect observed across hundreds of students in several different schools may obscure very different effects for particular schools, classrooms, and individuals. Depending on exactly how the particular effects were distributed around the average, the overall effect could paint an unrealistic picture. For instance, if the increase in "sense of belonging" was entirely concentrated in half the program schools, or in a fraction of the classrooms within the program schools, or in a subgroup of students, the average effect

would be misleading. In that case, it might be more interesting to consider differences between program schools, or between classrooms within program schools, than to consider differences between program schools as a whole and comparison schools. As a matter of fact, one CDP study found that five program schools successfully implemented the program, while seven did not; Osterman's discussion does not explore possible explanations for that difference.[20]

In calling attention to some of the wrinkles in the CDP studies, I don't mean to deny that they provide some support for the idea that it is possible to improve various student outcomes through interventions that target social relationships in the classroom. Yet it seems to me that there is a striking gap between the complexity of making sense of these lines of research and the simplicity of the generalizations Osterman offers about what "the research" in this area "tells us." If any given contribution to a body of research is so murky, can we be justified in concluding that the overall picture is clear? And even if the overall picture is clear *at some level of generality*, how useful is such a general picture to practitioners and policymakers? We'll address that last question extensively later in the chapter, but first I want to consider the strengths and limitations of a more formal method of generalizing about what the research shows.

"The overall corrected correlation…"

Some critics might contend that the problem with Osterman's approach is that her methods of ascertaining and summing up the weight of the evidence are too imprecise and impressionistic. From this perspective, the "principles of qualitative research" that guided Osterman in collecting and analyzing quantitative studies are insufficiently rigorous to warrant reliable conclusions about what those studies "establish"; it is not enough to eyeball a large number of statistical analyses and simply report that their findings are broadly consistent. To be fair, Osterman's aim was not limited to delivering an authoritative assessment of the effects of students' sense of belonging on various academic outcomes. But to the extent that we are after such an assessment, some social scientists would insist on the application of formalized, mathematically-precise analytic

methods for combining studies' specific findings. Such methods would ideally take into account—and if possible correct for—the methodological limitations and challenges that I raised in discussing the CDP study above.

This demand for more rigorous and systematic methods of synthesizing findings across studies has led to the growth of an increasingly popular genre of research review known as meta-analysis. There is no single method for conducting meta-analyses, though there are a few authoritative sets of guidelines that many meta-analysts follow. All meta-analyses extract and aggregate data from a collection of primary quantitative studies, with the goal of calculating a robust estimate of the effectiveness of a particular program, policy, product, or strategy. The meta-analyst uses the data in each study to express findings in terms of some common measure of effect size and then calculates the average effect size across all the studies. There are specific methods for weighting or adjusting the findings from different studies to account for differences in sample size or the reliability of the measures used.

Within the past ten years, the *Review of Educational Research* has published two meta-analyses of studies that measure the influence of student-teacher relationships on learning and academic engagement. The earlier of these meta-analyses, by Jeffrey Cornelius-White, appeared in 2007. It synthesized 119 studies published between 1948 and 2004. Together, these studies contained "1,450 findings involving approximately 355,325 students, 14,851 teachers, and 2,439 schools."[21] The second meta-analysis, by Debora Roorda and colleagues, followed four years later. Roorda's team synthesized the results of 99 studies published between 1990 and 2011, involving 129,423 students and at least 2,825 teachers, in 63 primary and 31 secondary schools on five continents.[22] Both syntheses deserve careful examination.

Cornelius-White was interested in assessing the efficacy of practices he associates with "learner-centered teacher-student relationships," a theoretical construct based on Carl Rogers's advocacy of "person-centered education." As we saw in Chapter 1, Rogers believed that learning depends critically on the quality of the relationship between the learner and a "facilitator." He suggested that meaningful, self-initiated learning is most likely to occur when facilitated by people who are authentic, accepting, and empathic in their interactions with the learner. That theory has been relatively influential in shaping

research on the relational aspects of teachers' work. The purpose of Cornelius-White's meta-analysis was to synthesize the many studies that link teachers' enactment of "learner-centered" relational practices to student outcomes.

The studies included in Cornelius-White's sample used an extremely diverse array of variables to measure both student outcomes and teachers' relational practices. Variables meant to indicate the presence of "positive learner-centered teacher-student relationships" included student ratings of teacher qualities like warmth, empathy, and genuineness; student or teacher reports of the frequency of specific practices such as non-directivity, honoring student voices, and adapting to individual and cultural and differences; and teacher reports of their own beliefs regarding principles of learner-centered education. Cornelius-White classified the student outcome variables into "cognitive" versus "affective or behavioral" outcomes. Cognitive outcomes were measured by variables as diverse as grades, performance on achievement tests, and performance on critical/creative thinking tasks; variables measuring affective or behavioral outcomes included (among others) student satisfaction, class participation, motivation, dropout prevention, and reduction in disruptive behavior. Cornelius-White used the strength of the correlation between relationship variables and student outcome variables as his common measure of effect size across studies.

From my perspective, his most important finding was that those correlations exhibit "wide variation."[23] They depend, for instance, on the specific outcomes examined. The correlations were stronger (on average) for "affective or behavioral" outcomes than for "cognitive" outcomes, but the variation within each of those categories was even greater.[24] Among the cognitive outcomes, the average correlation with relationship quality was quite strong for "critical/creative thinking" but relatively weak for "achievement batteries"; the effect on math and verbal achievement was much stronger than the effect on tests of science and social science. Among the affective or behavioral outcomes, "participation" and "student satisfaction" were strongly correlated with indicators of relationship quality, while the correlations were only moderate for "disruptive behavior" and "attendance"; relationship quality correlated reasonably well with "positive motivation," yet the correlation with "negative motivation" (i.e. work avoidance/low effort) was "negligible."

Moreover, measures of certain aspects or indicators of relationship quality showed stronger effects (on average) than others. For example, ratings of teachers' "non-directivity," "empathy," and "warmth" were more strongly correlated with student outcomes than ratings of their "genuineness."[25] Teachers' professed "learner-centered beliefs" showed "almost no relationship to positive student outcomes." The strength of the correlations also depended partly on teachers' demographic characteristics: they were stronger for female than for male teachers and for teachers of color as compared to Caucasian teachers.[26] Finally, the correlations varied depending on the source of the rating of relationship quality. Looking across outcomes, ratings supplied by students and third-party observers were on average more predictive than teacher ratings.[27]

Despite detailing all of this variation in the (measured) effects of relationship quality on student outcomes, Cornelius-White nonetheless renders a clear verdict on the effectiveness of "positive learner-centered" student-teacher relationships. That verdict is announced in the paper's title, which reads, "Learner-center teacher-student relationships are effective: a meta-analysis." He seems to base this conclusion in part on "the overall corrected correlation" between all relationship quality variables and all positive student outcomes (r=.31). He notes that this correlation is well above "the overall average correlation of r=.20 for all educational innovations."[28] Maybe so. But after reading through a detailed discussion of results suggesting that the "effectiveness" of positive student-teacher relationships depends on exactly which features of the relationship we are looking at and which outcomes we are measuring, the ultimate conclusion that "learner-center student-teacher relationships are effective" feels simplistic. Even Cornelius-White admits that it's unclear what the "overall" effect he calculated really means, given that it is an average of findings that involve a "heterogeneous" set of variables.[29]

The meta-analysis produced by Roorda and colleagues aimed explicitly to build on and refine Cornelius-White's work. They focused on a slightly narrower range of variables, restricting their sample to studies that measured the "affective" dimensions of relationship quality.[30] They divided measures of affective relationship quality into two categories: indicators of "positive" relationships (e.g., student perceptions of their teachers as warm or empathic) and indicators of "negative" relationships (i.e., ratings of the relationship as high in conflict).[31] Likewise, they divided student outcomes into

measures of "engagement" and "achievement." Their hypothesis was that negative aspects of student-teacher relationships would exert a stronger influence on both engagement and achievement than positive aspects—that the harm caused by conflict between students and teachers would be greater than the benefits conferred by relationships characterized by empathy and warmth. They also expected that the affective quality of the relationship would be more closely associated with engagement than achievement, on the theory that engagement is the primary mechanism through which relationship quality (indirectly) influences learning.

Their findings both confirmed and challenged their hypotheses. As expected, for both positive and negative relationship variables, the mean correlations with engagement were larger than the correlations with achievement.[32] But contrary to Roorda and colleagues' expectations, the mean correlation of positive relationship variables with both engagement and achievement was greater than the mean correlation with negative relationship variables.[33] Those averages, however, hide a wrinkle: among primary schools, the association between student engagement and negative relationships was indeed "somewhat stronger" than the association with positive relationships.[34] In other words, it is only in secondary schools that the positive aspects of student-teacher relationships appear to make more of a difference than the negative aspects.

More broadly, correlations between relationship quality and student outcomes were stronger for older students.[35] Roorda and colleagues call this a "remarkable finding, considering suggestions made in previous literature that students become increasingly independent from teachers and more focused on peers as they grow older." They suggest that "perhaps, TSRs [teacher-student relationships] are more important for older students because they face new academic challenges resulting from their lower engagement and the increasing complexity of the school system."

Roorda and colleagues report a litany of other findings. In addition to testing the effects of age on the influence of student-teacher relationships, they tested some of the other hypotheses we encountered in Chapter 1: namely, that student-teacher relationships would be more predictive of outcomes for lower-SES students, for ethnic minority students, and for boys. As we saw in Chapter 1, these hypotheses are sometimes grouped under the rubric of the "academic risk perspective," which predicts that the affective

quality of student-teacher relationships will matter more (on average) for children whose social or personal circumstances are associated with lower levels of school success. Roorda and colleagues claim to provide some support for the academic risk perspective.[36] They found that associations between relationship quality and engagement are generally stronger "in studies with more boys" and among "students who are academically at risk because of their low SES." On the other hand, they report that "support for the academic risk hypothesis is less strong with regard to student ethnicity."

Finally, they tested hypotheses about the influence of certain teacher characteristics on the correlations between relationship quality and student outcomes. Interestingly, some of their findings are directly opposite to Cornelius-White's. For instance, Roorda and colleagues found that the effects of relationship quality were stronger "for samples with more male teachers" and for "samples with more ethnic majority teachers." [37] They note, however, that it might be "more relevant for future research to investigate the influence of both gender and ethnic match between teacher and student," rather than the influence of the teacher's characteristics alone.

Like Cornelius-White, Roorda and colleagues ultimately sum up their analysis with broad generalizations about the "overall" effectiveness of high-quality student-teacher relationships. They conclude that "this meta-analytic review provided evidence for the importance of both positive and negative aspects of the TSR [teacher-student relationship] for students' learning at school. Overall, associations of TSRs with engagement and achievement were substantial."[38] They do qualify that conclusion, noting that the associations are generally weaker, "but still significant," in more methodologically sophisticated studies. They also note the other sources of variability in their findings, and they add the (self-evident) caveat that improving student-teacher relationships is not "sufficient" in itself "to improve students' learning behaviors." Nonetheless, they conclude by recommending a focus on "the affective quality of the TSR as a starting point for promoting school success," especially for "students at risk for academic maladjustment."

These recommendations are indicative of the role that research summaries—and especially meta-analyses—seem to play within the culture of "evidence-based" decision-making. Despite their power to highlight the variability of findings purporting to

measure the effectiveness of different practices, meta-analyses often drive toward generalized conclusions about the "overall" weight of the evidence. In other words, they are often framed as authoritative answers to questions like, "Does it work?"

The U.S. Department of Education has invested heavily in disseminating research addressing the "Does it work?" question. The Department's research arm, the Institute for Education Science, maintains a website known as the What Works Clearinghouse— where you can find bottom-line assessments of the effectiveness of all manner of policies, practices, products, and strategies for improving schools. These assessments are based on approved meta-analytic procedures for aggregating findings from studies that meet IES's standards for "high-quality research." The stated goal of the Clearinghouse is to "provide educators with the information they need to make evidence-based decisions."

However, in examining one research summary and two meta-analyses focused on the influence of student-teacher relationships, I have suggested that generalized bottom-line assessments of the evidence tend to understate both the methodological challenges of estimating the effects and the variability of those effects. Of course, "It's complicated to measure" and "It depends" are deeply unsatisfying answers to questions about whether an educational innovation "works." But if the most defensible answers are unsatisfying, perhaps the trouble lies with the question itself.

The limited utility of knowing "what works"

One problem with "Does it work?" as a central question in education research is that it presupposes a clear and uncontested vision of the purposes of schooling. We can know whether a particular strategy "works" only if we are agreed on what it is supposed to accomplish. Yet the purposes of schooling have been a moving target throughout the history of American education.[39] Is the goal to equalize economic opportunity and promote social mobility? To produce virtuous citizens, capable of sustaining a pluralistic democracy? To increase productivity and innovation in the economy by turning out efficient and creative workers? Something else? The way we conceive of and prioritize these different goals will surely affect how we assess the importance of student-teacher

relationships and the effectiveness of strategies aimed at enhancing them. And if, for instance, we adopted Nel Noddings's view that cultivating caring relationships is the primary purpose of schooling, we might think it inapt even to ask if caring student-teacher relationships are "effective"—at least insofar as the question implies that those relationships are only instrumentally valuable. As that example suggests, a discourse that moves too quickly to ask "Does it work?" may be avoiding important questions about ends in its search for more efficient means.

As important as this point is, I'd like to set it aside for the moment (we'll come back to it). Just for now, I want to assume that we can take for granted some vaguely coherent sense of what it would look like for schools to be successful. And let's further grant that we could reliably measure the outcomes we cared about and design studies that would warrant valid causal inferences about the tendency of different practices or strategies to bring about those outcomes. I want to suggest that even if they were warranted by well-designed studies and grounded in uncontroversial assumptions about the purposes of schooling, *generalized conclusions about "what works" would still be of limited utility to educators and policymakers*. To see why, I'd like to propose an extended thought experiment. Let's consider how an educator or policymaker might react to a study that concluded that focusing on improving the affective quality of student-teacher relationships is a relatively ineffective strategy for improving schools.

In Chapter 1, I referenced a study by Meredith Phillips that reached exactly that conclusion. The study appeared in 1997 in the American Educational Research Journal, a premier journal in the field. Its premise was that the school reform movement that took off in the 1990s followed two distinct strands: one advocating for more "communitarian" school climates (defined in part by an "ethic of caring") and one advocating for more "academic press" (defined in part by "high expectations," increased time spent on instruction, and an emphasis on "clear achievement-oriented goals"). To compare the efficacy of these two strategies, Phillips constructed statistical models that predicted the effects of each strategy on middle-schoolers' academic engagement and achievement. Engagement was measured by attendance, and achievement was measured by scores on tests of mathematical proficiency.

So what did these models show? Phillips found that while academic press was significantly associated with both higher attendance and higher math scores, a communitarian climate—even when combined with academic press—did not improve those outcomes. [40] In fact,

> in schools where the average level of teachers' caring for students is relatively high, students' test scores are relatively low.... These findings suggest that teachers in some schools may be more concerned with maintaining affective relations with students than with imparting skills.

In light of these findings, Phillips suggested that "improving a school's academic climate may be a more promising way to enhance students' attachment to school and their academic achievement." In her conclusion, she urged educators to "question the received wisdom about the benefits of communal schooling."

Now let's imagine that a middle school principal named Ms. P is reading this study. Based on other research and personal experience, Ms. P already favors what she thinks of as an academic press approach. She is certainly not *against* cultivating a community that values and enables caring relationships among students and staff; in fact, Ms. P believes that the distinction between academic press and communitarian strategies is largely artificial. As a practical matter, though, Ms. P is heavily focused on strategies like increasing instructional time in the core academic subjects, training teachers in the implementation of more "rigorous" curricula, and promoting a "college-going culture." I can imagine, in that case, that Ms. P might feel vindicated by Phillips's research and somewhat more confident in her current course.

But now let's look at the study from the perspective of Ms. P's colleague across town, another middle school principal named Mr. Q. Suppose that based on personal experience, Mr. Q is convinced that "relationships must come first" and that the trend toward focusing on academic press has compromised the quality of student-teacher relationships at middle schools across the country. Mr. Q has engaged his staff in a year-long process of identifying specific practices and organizational structures that might help them build better (i.e. more involved, less conflict-ridden, more "caring") relationships with their students. He and his staff are convinced that even by conventional measures of academic growth, a focus on relationship quality will improve student outcomes. So how might Mr. Q react to Phillips's conclusion that "teachers in

some schools may be more concerned with maintaining affective relations with students than with imparting skills" and that focusing on the school's academic climate seems "more promising" than focusing on "students' social and emotional needs"?

Mr. Q, let's suppose, is too fair-minded to dismiss Phillips's study out of hand. At the very least, he thinks, Phillips's findings are cautionary. She might have a point: well-intentioned teachers who prioritize caring for students as persons could find themselves de-emphasizing academic challenge and support. This is perhaps just one of the many pitfalls of trying to cultivate an ethos of caring in the school. Mr. Q makes a mental note to share the study with his faculty at one of their upcoming meetings as a way of stimulating discussion about the risks of the course they've embarked on. He believes that the dichotomy Phillips draws between prioritizing care for students and maintaining "high" academic expectations represents a false choice, but that it does help illuminate a potential tension that he wants his staff to confront and discuss.

Mr. Q does not, then, take the article as a reason to abandon his basic commitment to prioritizing relationships. After all, he reasons, it's only one study. And apparently an outlier at that. He has read countless other bits of research claiming that the most effective teachers are distinguished by the quality of their relationships with students, and he has drawn the same conclusion after observing dozens of teachers over the course of his administrative career. Pressed to reconcile Phillips's findings with his experience and intuition, Mr. Q would have no trouble identifying methodological limitations of the study and logical limitations on what can be inferred from its results. Phillips herself acknowledges that because her findings were based on a "largely working- and middle-class" sample, they may not generalize "to very poor students who live in areas where communal institutions have deteriorated substantially." (Let's suppose that the students served by Mr. Q's school live in just such an area.) Moreover, maybe mathematics achievement isn't an especially good measure of students' overall academic growth. Maybe attendance isn't the best measure of engagement, especially among the "working- and middle-class" students in Phillips's sample. Maybe the measures of school climate Phillips used are unreliable.

Plus, as we've seen, correlational results are notoriously easy to misinterpret. Perhaps it's not that teachers perceived as caring are less likely to help their students

grow academically, but that students who are struggling with personal or academic problems are more likely to require—and thus to perceive—"caring" responses from teachers. Indeed, Phillips acknowledges that the "small, negative relationship" between students' perceptions of teachers' caring and their mathematics achievement "probably reflects the fact that students with few personal problems do not talk with teachers about such matters and so do not portray their teachers as caring."[41] Given that qualification, it's not clear just how much stock we should put in Phillips's inference that teachers' focus on students' affective needs is stunting students' academic growth.

Finally, if Mr. Q really dug into Phillips's article, he'd find yet another reason to question the inference that the "communitarian" strategy is ineffective. Phillips notes that in her study, about 97 percent of the variance in students' perception of teachers' caring "can be attributed to students in the same school."[42] This means that even though the goal was to compare the effectiveness of different school climates, the schools in Phillips' sample barely differed at all, on average, in students' perception of teachers' caring. One interpretation of this finding might be that school-level variables have little effect on the quality of student-teacher relationships; this is a possibility worth considering, and one that should give Mr. Q pause given his goal of leading a school-wide push for better student-teacher relationships. But a more plausible interpretation is that Phillips was comparing schools that occupied a very narrow band on the spectrum of possible school social environments. It seems likely that most, if not all, of the 23 schools in Phillips's sample adhered to fairly conventional patterns of school organization that reflect fairly conventional expectations of teachers' instructional practice. It may be that within that narrow band of conventional schools, marginally higher ratings of teachers' caring do not mean all that much. But Phillips's study does not address the possibility of improving student outcomes by disrupting some of the conventional patterns of school organization that constrain the kind of relationships students and teachers can build. And that may be exactly what Mr. Q's strategy entails.

This last point is really the key to a broader argument for why general propositions about the "effectiveness" of strategies targeting student-teacher relationships probably won't—and shouldn't—sway Mr. Q one way or the other. Whatever those general propositions might say about his favored strategy, the question for Mr. Q is not

whether that strategy works *in general*. The question is whether the specific plan he and his staff devise will work in their particular context, given their particular capabilities. It may be that if we look across some representative sample of all attempts to focus school improvement efforts on student-teacher relationships, the result in the typical case—what statisticians might call the central tendency—is disappointing. But while perhaps Mr. Q should be mindful of the central tendency, he shouldn't be controlled by it. The central tendency does not exhaust all the possibilities; any strategy that "generally" succeeds or fails will succeed in some of its particular instantiations and fail in other instances. The "average" effectiveness of any given strategy doesn't tell Mr. Q whether he can make some version of the strategy work well for his staff and students.

Note that Mr. Q's situation highlights the limitations even of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), sometimes considered the methodological "gold standard" for warranting claims about "what works" in education.[43] RCTs are modeled on clinical drug trials, which randomly assign large groups of subjects to receive the experimental treatment, a leading alternative, or a placebo. Yet even in the context of drug trials, one widely recognized limitation of RCTs is that the central tendency they reveal may not reflect the effects of the treatment or intervention on any particular individual or subgroup.[44] For the same reason, Mr. Q should not necessarily be deterred even by a pile of technically unassailable RCTs suggesting that a focus on student-teacher relationships is, on average, relatively ineffective. His students might benefit, even if most don't.

But it's not just that educational interventions, like drug treatments, may be more effective with some people than others, or more effective in some contexts than others. The deeper point, perhaps, is that testing the efficacy of a drug is very much unlike testing a pedagogical hypothesis. Unlike a drug, which is precisely manufactured according to a fixed chemical formula and delivered in accordance with strict protocols, a strategy for improving schools will be conceptualized, formulated, and implemented differently by everybody who tries it. Of course, if a strategy or idea can be described reasonably coherently, there may be certain typical patterns of implementation. But what it means to adopt, say, a "communitarian" approach to school improvement is much more fluid than fixed. Mr. Q's way of doing it may be quite different from the approaches adopted by the schools in Phillips's study. In fact, Mr. Q and his staff will almost

certainly develop their particular approach as they go, constantly taking stock of how well it is going and recalibrating accordingly.

Thus, one reason why generalized assertions about whether "it" works might be of limited use to practitioners like Mr. Q is that the "it" is a malleable construct, perpetually under construction by those who take it seriously. This is particularly obvious when the "it" refers to a broad idea like "focusing on student-teacher relationships"—which as we've seen can be conceptualized and operationalized in many different ways. It might seem, then, that the problem lies in trying to capture the effectiveness of too broad and amorphous a strategy; perhaps if we were studying more specific practices or products, generalized claims about their efficacy would be more useful. But even a relatively specific organizational practice like "advisory" can be motivated by many different theories and take many different forms—including forms that might not be immediately recognized as "advisory" at all (e.g., the "Surf Bus" discussed in Chapter 2). My sense, in fact, is that any truly generative idea about pedagogy or the organization of schooling cannot be specified to the point where it can be faithfully delivered with the precision and constancy of a drug dosage. This doesn't mean that data on the effects of reasonably well-specified educational interventions is useless. But it does mean that such data may be more useful as a way of opening up a conversation, rather than as a way of resolving uncertainty about "what works."

Admittedly, we have been considering the usefulness of generalized claims about the effectiveness of promoting "caring" student-teacher relationships only from the perspective of a school principal. Perhaps these kinds of claims would be more useful to someone at a further remove from the day-to-day work of schools, like a district superintendent or state policymaker.[45] Even if the central tendencies of a given pedagogical strategy are of less interest to front-line educators who feel like they know what will work in their own context, maybe knowing whether something *tends* to work better or worse on average will be of greater interest to a policymaker who must decide which strategies to support across the system. But that suggestion assumes a model of policymaking in which the job of the policymaker is to consider a fixed set of strategies for improving student outcomes and then find ways to promote the ones deemed "best." This is hardly the only model of policymaking for education. Policymaking approaches

that stress dialogue across levels of the system would make very different use of generalized claims about the effectiveness of particular strategies than models that stress centralized decision-making in accordance with "best practices."

It bears emphasizing that my goal here is not to give people like Mr. Q license to ignore, minimize, or explain away findings that challenge their intuitions about student-teacher relationships while selectively embracing research that supports their preconceptions. Everything I've said about the limited utility of generalizations about "what works" applies equally to the many primary studies and research summaries that pronounce a focus on student-teacher relationships "effective" overall. I think we should be wary of the tendency to argue for the benefits of a relational focus or specific relational practices on the grounds that "the research establishes" their efficacy. It's not just that broad claims about what the research shows are often over-simplified and poorly warranted. It's that knowing that a general strategy generally works may offer little practical guidance to someone who has to define, carry out, and refine that strategy in a particular context.

Developing theory through case-based research

Not all social science aims to establish rule-like statements about what works in general. Social scientists operating within the broad tradition of "case study," for instance, aim to produce explanations of what has occurred in a particular time and place.[46] By specifying and comparing what Ray Pawson calls the "context, mechanism, outcome configurations" present over a range of cases, researchers gradually build a base of knowledge about the complex systems they study.[47] Pamela Moss and Edward Haertel note that because this knowledge is grounded in relatively detailed analytic case summaries, it can "address questions not just about *what* works to change complex systems, but about *how* (through what mechanisms in what order), where and when, with whom and under what conditions, and whether the same workings can be anticipated 'elsewhere' and 'elsewhen.'"[48] Moss and Haertel emphasize that the purpose of generating such knowledge is "not to justify a particular course of action across contexts,

but rather to illuminate the features that local decision-makers might take into account in considering how best to promote change in their own contexts."[49] In-depth analysis and comparison of particular cases can thus be viewed as a vehicle for developing theoretical models that help discipline, without determining, the thinking of practitioners.

Before examining an example of case-based theory-development within the research literature on student-teacher relationships, it might be helpful to distinguish among different types of "theory." In the middle of the twentieth century, a sociologist named Robert Merton confronted the proliferation of "total sociological systems" that attempt to subsume all social phenomena within a unified explanatory framework featuring just a few basic concepts and themes.[50] Merton considered the claims of these comprehensive systems to be "premature" and "extravagant" because they were not grounded in the steady accumulation of verified knowledge through the patient investigation and observation of many generations of social scientists. He argued that sociologists would be more productive in the long run if they invested their time and energies into the development of

> *theories of the middle range*: theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization, and social change.[51]

Merton notes that "middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing." Middle-range theory thus addresses "delimited aspects of social phenomena" and consists of "empirically grounded generalizations of modest scope." Merton does not abandon the aim of working toward a "progressively more general conceptual scheme," but he insists that "comprehensive sociological theory" must emerge gradually, through the elaboration and consolidation of "special theories applicable to limited conceptual ranges."[52]

More recently, Alexander George and Andrew Bennett have invoked Merton's conception of middle-range theory as a shorthand for the level of theoretical abstraction that (they think) best meets the needs of decision-makers.[53] In particular, they stress the practical usefulness of a category of middle-range theory they call "generic knowledge."[54] They define generic knowledge as a set of narrow, conditional

generalizations relevant to the "generic problems" that practitioners in a field routinely encounter. For instance, a generic problem in maintaining positive student-teacher relationships might be responding to student resistance to academic demands; the idea is that teachers might benefit from knowledge of alternative approaches to that problem and the conditions that favor the success of each approach. George and Bennett do not suggest that case-based research is the only means of generating generic knowledge, but they do show how the process of summarizing and comparing highly-contextualized cases can yield generalizations—or at least testable hypotheses—about how, where, when, and with whom it might make sense to adopt a particular strategy. Like Moss and Haertel, George and Bennett frame such generalizations "as an input" to decision-making processes and "as an aid to, not a substitute for" context-specific judgments.[55]

It is easy enough to find case studies addressing "generic problems" related to the improvement of student-teacher relationships. Suppose, for example, we were interested in the problem of designing experiences for pre-service teachers that prepare them to establish "caring" relationships with students and their families. For insight into that problem, we might turn to a paper I mentioned in the last chapter by Morva McDonald, Michael Bowman, and Kate Brayko.[56] The paper presents a case study of an innovation the authors developed at the University of Washington, which required elementary teaching candidates in the first quarter of their Master's program to spend six hours per week in after-school programs run by community-based organizations (CBOs) serving "diverse children." Because CBOs tend to prioritize "caring" relationships with young people, the authors theorized that after-school programs would be good sites for helping new teachers learn about the "relational aspects of teaching."

The case study spanned three years and followed two cohorts of teaching candidates. Embedded within the larger study were case studies of twelve focal students placed in ten different CBOs. Altogether, the authors conducted 124 individual interviews, five focus groups, 70 observations of university courses, and 28 observations of teaching candidates in their CBO placements. They also collected and analyzed related course syllabi, course assignments, and entry and exit surveys.

Their analysis is presented in two parts. Part I affirms that the innovation did generally work as intended. The stated goal of the placements was to introduce pre-

service teachers to "relational teaching practices." And the authors report that indeed "the CBO placements facilitated opportunities to learn related to the knowledge, methods, and skills of *seeing children*, which we view as core to one's capacity to build relationships with and teach students."[57] Specifically, they found that the

> placements afforded [participants] opportunities to: (1) Develop deeper understandings of students and communities; (2) Develop more nuanced understandings of diversity, including intra-group diversity; (3) Examine school from an out-of-school perspective; and (4) Attend to the role of context in learning.

The authors illustrate each of these learning opportunities with examples and quotations from particular teaching candidates. But then they add an important caveat. They note that "our analysis also revealed significant variation in how candidates appropriated the concept of seeing children."[58] In other words, while significant learning opportunities may have been available to all the candidates across all the CBO placements, some candidates got more out of the experience than others.

In Part II, the authors exploit this variation to address questions about how, for whom, and under what conditions the CBO placements produced the best effects. They do this by comparing the cases of two focal teaching candidates, Margo and Dallas. The authors "view Margo's case as an instance that illustrates powerful opportunities to learn in a CBO placement, while Dallas' case represents an instance in which that experience was less valued and less valuable."[59] Because Margo and Dallas were similar along many dimensions—they both had limited prior exposure to racial diversity, followed similar paths into teaching, and expressed "almost identical" perceptions and beliefs about teaching and learning in diverse classrooms—the authors deemed the comparison "particularly strategic" for illuminating the "situational factors" that influence the quality of candidates' experience at CBOs.[60]

Without denying the role played by individual differences and personal agency, the authors highlight differences in the candidates' CBO placements in explaining why the experience might have been more valuable for Margo. In particular, they trace Margo's deep engagement with the young people and staff at her CBO to the strengths of the site's director, Jessica, who was "exceptionally good at conveying knowledge and practices to candidates."[61] As compared with the director of the CBO where Dallas was

placed, Jessica was more proactive in her interactions with the candidates, taking the time to make explicit to them the design and logic of the after-school program's various activities. For example: Jessica effectively articulated to Margo "the theoretical rationale of the structure and purpose of snack time," modeled conversation with children while they snacked, and invited Margo to use snack time to practice "strategies for learning about children and sharing information." Thus, the authors claim, "Jessica's expertise facilitated Margo's perception of snack time as (1) an educative experience, and (2) as an opportunity to develop and enact relational practices." They go on to speculate that because Jessica made Margo more alert to the value and logic of routines like snack time, Margo may also have been more motivated to enact and reflect on the relational practices that were introduced to her through her university coursework.[62]

In many ways, this comparative analysis of the cases of Margo and Dallas exemplifies the purposes of case-study research. The authors aimed not (just) to report an overall outcome of their experiment in teacher education, but to illuminate the intersecting contexts and mechanisms that combined to produce a range of different outcomes. The complexity of their explanation of the quality of Margo's experience in comparison with Dallas's reflects the richness of the data they were able to assemble. At the same time, they were able to generate from within that complexity at least a tentative, modest generalization about the conditions that favor the success of field placements with CBOs: namely, that the expertise and engagement of the site director enables teaching candidates to take advantage of the unique opportunities that CBOs afford to develop "relational practices." That conclusion may not be especially surprising, but it is a good example of how "middle-range theory" develops. The authors use contrasting cases to address questions about how, why, for whom, and under what circumstances pre-service teachers benefit from non-school-based field placements. If their comparative analysis of Margo's and Dallas's experience is sound, it might in principle be useful to others working on the problem of preparing pre-service teachers to care for students.

One question, then, is how we can know that the authors have accurately interpreted and explained what happened with Margo and Dallas. After all, the theory that emerges from case comparisons is only as valid as the representation of the cases themselves. Of course, the authors can and do present us with evidence to support their

characterization of Margo as getting more out of the CBO placement than Dallas; likewise, they marshal evidence, mostly in the form of interview transcripts, to support their explanation of what accounted for that difference. Some readers may think the proffered evidence scant and unpersuasive, while others may think it sufficient to warrant the story the authors tell. But given that our own access to the evidence is controlled by the authors, how can we ever be sure that the interpretation they offer comports with reality? How could we know if the authors have missed something important? How could the authors themselves know?

Perhaps a more pragmatic version of these questions would ask what can be done to mitigate the risk of error and unconscious bias in case analysis.[63] The authors of the study we've been examining anticipate that question and address it in a fairly typical way: they portray case analysis as a disciplined, systematic process with clearly defined steps and built-in protections against error and bias. First, they describe their data analysis as an "iterative" process, whereby they "systematically coded" voluminous interview and focus group transcripts.[64] This means that they annotated the transcripts, tagging passages according to the themes and conceptual categories they exemplify. As in many case studies, the authors indicate that the "codes" (i.e. categories and themes) they used emerged both from prior literature and through successive readings and discussions of the data at hand. The authors affirm that "at least two people on the research team coded each interview" and that they "held frequent discussions about coding" throughout the process to ensure "inter-coder reliability." They also "triangulated interviews with observational data and course documents," meaning that they sought to corroborate inferences drawn from one data source with evidence from other sources. The authors refer to all of these steps as "disconfirming evidence procedures," suggesting that their purpose was to assure that the team would seek out and grapple with evidence that did not accord with their emerging understanding of the case.

Although these procedures might arguably have strengthened the validity of the authors' claims,[65] they do not—and are not meant to—transform case-analysis into an "objective" process. There is a widespread recognition that the process of constructing explanations from a welter of qualitative (and, for that matter, quantitative[66]) data is inherently subject to the preconceptions and partial perceptions of the researchers.

Different groups of researchers, following the same formal analytic procedures, would surely have analyzed the experiences of Margo and Dallas in their CBO field placements differently. They would have begun with different prior experiences and theoretical perspectives, noticed different features of the case, and generated different explanations for what they saw. Some researchers, for instance, might have foregrounded individual differences between Margo and Dallas that McDonald, Bowman, and Brayko chose to downplay. It is just a truism that our observations of the world are subject to multiple interpretations, and many alternative explanations of a given outcome could be plausible and true at the same time. To acknowledge the multiplicity of plausible accounts of a given dataset is not to say that all accounts are equally true, valid, or valuable. It is just to say that the standard for judging a social scientific study cannot be whether it offers the single best interpretation or explanation of the evidence. A more workable standard would ask instead whether the study illuminates some practically meaningful aspect(s) of the case, without distorting, ignoring, or obscuring others.[67]

From the beginning of this section, we have assumed that the comparative analysis of cases can help inform local decision-making by contributing to a body of middle-range theory—relatively narrow generalizations about the mechanisms that produce particular outcomes in particular contexts. It is important to note that this process of generalization does not and need not follow the same logic as statistical sampling. Margo and Dallas are just two pre-service teachers, enrolled in a single teacher preparation program; obviously, the authors cannot use the laws of probability to infer that the causal patterns present in their cases are representative of pre-service teachers in general. For this reason, it is sometimes said that case-based analyses are not generalizable.[68] Yet simply by producing a comparative analysis of two cases, the authors were inevitably "generalizing"—that is, they were specifying a causal pattern in at least somewhat general terms.[69] They were not trying to prove, in a probabilistic sense, that the pattern they detected in the cases of Margo and Dallas will hold everywhere else. Rather, they were leveraging their detailed familiarity with a small number of cases to identify a "situational factor"—namely, the expertise and proactivity of the CBO site director—that other teacher educators might attend to elsewhere.

At its best, then, case-based research engages users in an active and ongoing learning process, in which theory generated by case comparisons influences what we perceive and try out in our own contexts. Thus, borrowing a phrase supplied by John Bransford and Dan Schwartz, we might say that articles like the one we've been considering constitute *preparation for future learning*.[70] Readers' learning is not limited to assimilating and applying the authors' theory of what it takes to make CBOs productive sites for developing relational practices. The cases of Margo and Dallas, and the conceptual categories the authors used to compare them, are available to readers for comparison with other cases they might come across, either in the literature or in their own experience. Moreover, attuned to some of the factors that shape beginning teachers' opportunities to practice caring for young people in different environments, readers may devise or tinker with innovations of their own, from which they will surely draw new lessons. The precise course of such learning trajectories is often hard to trace retrospectively and always impossible to predict in advance. The point is just that the reader's learning from any particular case study does not end with the transmission of the theoretical propositions that constitute the study's findings.

A political scientist named Bent Flyvbjerg has been an especially eloquent spokesperson for the idea that we should conceptualize social scientific research as a vehicle for learning. More provocatively, he has suggested that many of the most educative case studies are not organized around the validation of theoretical propositions at all. Drawing on an intellectual tradition stretching back to Aristotle, Flyvbjerg complains that the social scientific community has allowed theory-development to displace what should be scholars' ultimate objective: to help people deliberate more productively and act more wisely. In the next section, we consider Flyvbjerg's proposal for reorienting social science toward that goal and what it means for research on student-teacher relationships.

Narrative as vicarious learning experience

In a controversial book called *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg insists that the usefulness of social research will be limited so long as social scientists are focused mainly on adding to a growing body of validated general propositions. That focus, he argues, is the legacy of a flawed conception of social science as the search for universal causal relationships—the sort of "laws of nature" that we might associate with physics or chemistry. Flyvbjerg does not deny that there are observable patterns and regularities in the social world, which we could express, if we wanted to, with the mathematical precision of a universal law. His point is that knowledge of general propositions is not what enables competent—let alone expert—action in the social sphere. We don't learn how to act wisely by accumulating and applying knowledge of law-like generalities. Rather, we become "virtuoso social performers" through engagement with the particulars of countless social situations. That is, we develop situational creativity and judgment—a tacit feel for navigating a set of circumstances—mainly through experience.[71]

For Flyvbjerg, social science "matters" only to the extent that it helps people learn how to identify and critically evaluate the choices available to them as social actors. But if Flyvbjerg is right that this learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of true general propositions—that it is the product of some kind of experiential process—then how can social scientists help? The answer, according to Flyvbjerg, lies in the power of stories to produce the kind of reflective response that first-hand experience is supposed to elicit. He suggests that one especially useful contribution social scientists can make is to produce richly detailed narratives that pull readers into other peoples' experiences as a way of broadening and deepening their own.[72] The idea is that these narratives will afford readers a concrete context in which to confront, name, and clarify some of the "problems, risks, and possibilities we face as humans and societies."[73]

In critiquing the tendency of (some) social scientists to overvalue the usefulness of general propositions, Flyvbjerg is not proposing to banish all generalities from social scientific discourse. It's hard to see how that would be possible. Part of what it means to learn from experience is to abstract at least tentative, plausible generalizations from the

particularities of a case. Flyvbjerg's concern, though, is that the social scientific community privileges research products that are formally organized around the identification and validation of theoretical propositions. Indeed, as we've seen, case studies are often framed as vehicles for developing "middle-range theory." Case studies published in the leading education journals often foreground a set of central interpretive claims about the case, which are supposed—if perhaps tentatively or implicitly—to contribute to a more general theory of like cases. Discrete bits of data drawn from interview transcripts, field-notes, survey responses, and so on are presented as evidence of those claims. The templates preferred by many of the most prominent research journals are designed, at least in part, to enable readers to quickly locate the study's principal "findings" or "conclusions." Flyvbjerg's point is that in reducing "the case" to a source of evidence for general propositions, this standard format limits opportunities for readers' emotional and intellectual engagement.

McDonald, Bowman, and Brayko's study of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) as sites for learning "relational teaching practices" offers a case in point. Following the format mandated by *Teachers College Record*, the authors clearly delineate their "findings" and "conclusions" in a structured abstract at the head of the article. The first third or so of the text explains the innovation that formed the subject of the study, the gaps in theoretical knowledge that the study was meant to address, the authors' "conceptual framework" for understanding phenomena related to teachers' professional learning, and their "methods" for gathering and analyzing data. Then we get to the substantive analysis of the experiences of the teaching candidates, with an eventual focus on the experiences of Margo and Dallas. The actual description of those experiences is quite sparse, containing just enough detail to substantiate the authors' findings about (1) the different types of learning opportunities available to teaching candidates at CBOs and (2) the "situational factors" that explain why the quality of those opportunities might have varied. We catch glimpses of life at the CBOs and hear some of the reflections and recollections of the teaching candidates. But I don't think readers could say that we have gotten to know Margo or Dallas, their peers, their instructors, or the children and staff they worked with at their CBOs. Certainly we don't feel that we have shared in any of their experiences vicariously.

This doesn't mean that the authors have constructed a poor case study according to the standards of the field. On the contrary, I suspect that many readers would praise the study for articulating a clear contribution to the theoretical knowledge base and for organizing the text relatively tightly around that contribution. Nonetheless, the experience of reading the article—and the learning it would afford—would be quite different if it contained a more richly detailed narrative of Margo's and Dallas's time at the CBOs. At a minimum, such a narrative would include vivid portraits of the teaching candidates interacting with others at their teaching sites and complete accounts of critical episodes that transpired during their placements. Most importantly, the overriding purpose of the narrative would not be to tell readers how the authors interpret the case (though there is room for such authorial commentary in any narrative). Rather, the overriding purpose would be to engage readers in the process of exploring the world that the authors reveal. A narrative might, for instance, offer readers enough information to form their own opinions about the value of Dallas's and Margo's experience, rather than requiring them to accept as given the authors' characterization of Margo's experience as "more valuable." A narrative would, moreover, invite readers to imagine themselves in the position of Margo or Dallas—to consider what they would have made of the opportunity to work with kids within the context of a CBO.

Of course, the reader's freedom to imagine these things is always shaped and constrained by choices the authors have made: the questions they pose, the interpretations they offer, the language they use, the details they hide or foreground. But the mark of a good narrative is that it stimulates thinking that goes beyond what the authors precisely intended. Readers are left with more than knowledge of a valid general proposition, like "site directors influence the quality of teaching candidates' learning opportunities at CBOs." They are left with something akin to an experiential sense of what it's like for a teaching candidate to learn in that setting.

Flyvbjerg's idea isn't that "narrative" should supplant genres of social scientific writing that are formally organized around the development of generalized theories. He would be content just to see the balance shift, so that the sort of narratives he values as powerful sources of quasi-experiential learning will become more common and more prominent in the discourse on social issues. As it stands, Flyvbjerg suggests that these

narratives are all too rare, even among published research that claims to employ a case-study methodology. There is considerable pressure, he suggests, for case studies to present themselves in a way that can be summarized or abstracted as evidence for an emerging theoretical model. Flyvbjerg urges case-based researchers to resist these pressures, at least some of the time. He wants them to produce case studies that preserve the "rich ambiguity" of reality; case studies that are "irreducible" to general propositions; case studies that must be read through in their entirety to be appreciated, rather than skimmed or summarized; case studies that leave it up to readers to make what they will of the case, albeit in conversation with the author and other scholars.[74]

These attributes of good case narratives reflect Flyvbjerg's sense that research is most useful when it engages people in reflection on their own experience. His conception of what research should do thus marks a sharp departure from rhetoric that touts scientific evidence as an inherently more trustworthy guide to rational decision-making than personal experience, intuitions, and feelings. As the National Research Council has observed, the push for evidence-based policy and practice "explicitly rejects habit, tradition, ideology, and personal experience as a basis for policy choices."[75] Flyvbjerg's proposal for revitalizing the social sciences pushes in the opposite direction, affirming personal experience as a source of evidence that must be complemented—not automatically superseded—by research. For Flyvbjerg, the goal is to "produce input to the ongoing social dialogue and *praxis* in a society, rather than to generate ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge."[76] We've seen that social scientists who aim to develop middle-range theory tend to share this perspective, at least in principle. But Flyvbjerg suggests that a case study presented as engaging narrative, as opposed to a set of findings, is especially conducive to dialogue because it allows "ample scope for readers to make different interpretations and draw diverse conclusions."[77]

Flyvbjerg also emphasizes that the dialogue he hopes to enrich must be at least as focused on critical examination of social values as it is on the means of realizing them. I noted earlier that one limitation of the "Does it work?" question is that it presupposes an uncontested purpose of schooling relative to which the effectiveness of different practices could be assessed. From some perspectives, this bracketing of arguments over goals might be seen as essential to the function of social science—a way of carving out within

the larger public sphere a niche for social scientists as experts on finding the best means toward any given end.[78] But Flyvbjerg believes that modern societies have become all too adept at avoiding questions of ultimate value by steering the conversation toward arguments about "what works." He thinks that social scientists make their most significant contributions when they resist that tendency—when they explicitly aim to clarify the unspoken "values and interests" that drive (or are at stake in) our social choices. Moreover, he is convinced that detailed narratives that situate readers in the thick of the action have a unique power to prompt questions like "Where are we going?" and "Is this desirable?" and "What should be done?"[79]

It is telling that in thinking of examples of these kinds of narratives, I find myself reaching beyond the social sciences to the arts and humanities. Literature and movies seem to have the qualities that Flyvbjerg is looking for in a richly detailed case study; certainly, literature and movies have provided both impetus and fodder for some of my own deepest thinking about student-teacher relationships. Among those works of art that have stuck with me is a French film titled *Entre Les Murs* (marketed in English as *The Class*). The movie is unusual in portraying its protagonist teacher as neither hero nor villain in his apparently well-intentioned, erratic, and ultimately inept efforts to forge relationships with students that are authentic to his values and responsive to their needs. If the film feels true-to-life, perhaps it's because it is based on "an autobiographical novel" by a former teacher who plays himself in the movie.[80] For the better part of two hours, the viewer is immersed in his multiethnic Parisian classroom, alternately cringing and laughing at the interactions that occur within its walls. It is possible to draw many different conclusions (or no conclusions at all) from the experience, but it is impossible not to ruminate on it afterward. I can remember thinking: In what ways am I like this teacher? How can I avoid being like him? What are his best qualities and tragic flaws? What exactly is the source and the nature of the mutual mistrust that hovers in his classroom? What, if anything, could cut through it? In refusing to provide straightforward answers to these questions, the movie leaves us no choice but to think about them for ourselves and to discuss them with colleagues. The wealth of concrete detail in the film affords plenty of grist for that mill.

We might, then, understand Flyvbjerg's push for more narrative as a call to bridge the divide between social scientific research and more artistic or humanistic modes of scholarship. Other voices have sounded the same call. Elliot Eisner, for instance, was a prolific advocate for what he called an "arts-based" approach to educational research. He explained that "what arts-based educational research seeks is not so much conclusions that readers come to believe but the number and quality of the questions the work raises."[81] Like Flyvbjerg, Eisner was especially appreciative of the role of artfully constructed narratives in human learning:

> To the extent that experience itself can be conceived of as the primary medium of education, stories are among the most useful means for sharing what one has experienced. Narrative—which means a telling—makes it possible for others to have access not only to our own lives when our stories about them but also to the lives of others. Narrative, when well crafted, is a spur to imagination, and through our imaginative participation in the worlds that we create we have a platform for seeing what might be called our "actual worlds" more clearly. Furthermore, when narrative is well crafted, empathic forms of understanding are advanced.[82]

Based on this argument, Eisner suggested that in principle even novels could count as research (and be acceptable as dissertations in schools of education).[83] He acknowledged that there probably is no definition of social *science* that would include fiction within its boundaries, but he insisted that scientific inquiry is merely one "species of research." Eisner's fondest ambition, though, was to marry the social scientist's carefulness and depth of expertise with the artist's concern for the aesthetic experience of the reader. The best kind of narrative research, he suggested, would blend both sets of qualities.[84]

Meanwhile, another education scholar, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, was pioneering a distinct research tradition called "portraiture" that aspires to precisely the sort of blending Eisner describes. Lawrence-Lightfoot defines portraiture as "a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences" that combines "systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities, and scientific rigor."[85] Portraiture is the product of many of the same investigative and analytic techniques at work in the forms of qualitative case study more familiar to social science researchers, except that

> the attempt is to move beyond the academy's inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive, and to develop texts that will seduce the readers

into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them. Portraitists write to inform and inspire readers.[86]

As a method that aims to "inspire," portraiture incorporates an explicit bias in favor of identifying and understanding—without sanitizing—positive examples. It "begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections."[87]

Like Eisner and Lawrence-Lightfoot, Flyvbjerg notes the role that art and literature play in helping "us comprehend the reality in which we live."[88] But he points especially to philosophy—or to what Pierre Bourdieu called "fieldwork in philosophy"—as the model of a more useful social science.[89] One of Flyvbjerg's favorite examples of case study research is a classic book titled *Habits of the Heart*, by a team led by sociologist Robert Bellah. The book uses detailed, sensitive, and sometimes disquieting portraits of the lives of a handful of Americans, to—as Flyvbjerg puts it—"enter into a dialogue with individuals and society and to assist them… in reflecting on their values."[90] Bellah and his team view their work as a kind of hybrid of sociology and philosophy. Indeed, they use the phrase "social science as public philosophy" to capture what Flyvbjerg loves about the book: its use of concrete, detailed, partially-interpreted cases at the center of an explicit conversation about living well in a particular society.

All of this is just to say that a complete answer to a question like "what does the research show about the importance of student-teacher relationships" must at least point toward some of the many artistic and/or philosophical portraits of life in schools. Many of my favorite books in this genre feature essays by current or former teachers, reflecting on their own experiences as both teacher and student: Herb Kohl's *Growing Minds*, Jonathan Kozol's *Letters to a Young Teacher*, and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* all come to mind. A number of scholarly research projects have also yielded rich narrative accounts of the relationships that emerge (or fail to emerge) between young people and adults at school; these include Lawrence-Lightfoot's *The Good High School*, Denise Pope's *Doing School*, and Herb Childress's *Landscapes of Betrayal, Landscapes of Joy*.

Still we might ask: considered together, what does the research embodied in these rich narrative accounts show? The inevitable, unsatisfying answer is that you'll just have to read them. It is a key feature—not a bug—of these texts that they cannot be easily

summarized, aggregated, averaged, or otherwise reduced to general propositions. I don't mean that it's impossible to extract some key "takeaways" from each narrative, or to identify common themes across a collection of narratives. To be sure, the authors sprinkle their narratives with generalizable interpretations that, perhaps, they hope will contribute to a growing body of theory. Yet the usefulness of these texts lies beyond those contributions, in the vicarious experiences they afford. At least in part, it is the aesthetic quality of the narrative—the depth and vividness of detail, the emotional identification with the characters, the sensitivity of the author's voice—that prepares readers for future learning.

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I appreciate the reader's indulgence in allowing me to offer a philosophical and perhaps oblique answer to the seemingly straightforward question about what "the research shows." My intention was not to evade the question, but to show why it is not as simple as it may have seemed. I've tried to demonstrate that many claims about what the research shows in this area are over-simplified—and that they sometimes define "research" in a way that excludes some of the texts that seem best suited to help us think deeply about the value and complexity of students' relationships with teachers.

Questions about "what the research shows" may even disserve us insofar as they represent an appeal to the authority of science to settle things once and for all. I have tried to present a different model of what it means to learn from research on student-teacher relationships. Rather than representing "the research" as a collection of verified answers to empirical questions, I have cast it as a source of information, examples, and even experiences that inspire and enable us to question what we are doing, grapple with complex realities, and generate creative ideas.

Running through this chapter has been an argument for reframing research products as educative texts—for producing scholarship that provides readers not only with credible information, but with an experience that stimulates growth by engaging them in good conversation. Research products can be educative in this way regardless of the kind of data or methodologies they draw upon. A social scientific text can "seduce

the readers into thinking more deeply about the issues that concern them" whether it presents a narrative, a case-study, or a meta-analysis. Perhaps not every research product need have that goal of "seducing" readers. But it is interesting to contemplate how the form of scholarly writing (and the culture surrounding academic inquiry and publication) might change if we consistently saw ourselves as facilitating educative experiences rather than (just) contributing to a growing knowledge base.

In developing this dissertation project, I wanted to play around a bit with the idea of an educative research synthesis. From the beginning, I have framed the project as a wide-ranging philosophical foray into a vaguely bounded region of scholarly literature. If the dissertation has been successful, then the process of engaging with it has offered readers a chance to develop their own theories, questions, and plans; perhaps it has just planted the seeds of such thinking, or disrupted certain settled patterns of thought. As much as possible, I have tried to create an atmosphere conducive to future learning by making clear that the goal has not been to drive toward any single, ultimate conclusion.

Yet the task of "concluding" the dissertation remains.

Chapter Notes

[1] Schwandt, Straf, & Prewitt, 2012, p. 2.

[2] *Id.*, p. 50.

[3] *Id.*, citing Sutherland *et al.*, 2012, p. 4.

[4] *See* Schwandt, Straf, & Prewitt, 2012, pp. 29-31 and Chapter 3.

[5] One such initiative, described in more detail later in this chapter, is the What Works Clearinghouse.

[6] *See* Schwandt, Straf, & Prewitt, 2012, pp. 46-50.

[7] Eisenhart, 1998, p. 394, quoting LeCompte & Preissle, 1992, p. 816.

[8] Osterman, 2000, p. 327.

[9] *Id.*, p. 326.

[10] *Id.*

[11] *Id.*, p. 343.

[12] *Id.*, p. 344.

[13] *Id.*, p. 360.

[14] Solomon *et al.*, 1996.

[15] *Id.*, p. 743.

[16] *Id.*, p. 724.

[17] Osterman, 2000, p. 329, citing Solomon *et al.,* 1996.

[18] Osterman, 2000, p. 332.

[19] *Id.*, 334.

[20] *Id.*, 332.

[21] Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 119.

[22] Roorda *et al.*, 2011, p. 501.

[23] Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 113.

[24] *Id.*, p. 127. The findings described in this paragraph are all drawn from pp. 127-128.

[25] *Id.*, p. 120, 127.

[26] *Id.*, p. 130.

[27] *Id.* However, teacher ratings were slightly more predictive than student ratings of affective or behavioral outcomes, which were most closely associated with third-party observations and composites of all three perspectives.

[28] *Id.*, citing Fraser et al., 1987.

[29] Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 133. Cornelius-White also acknowledges that "it is possible that these teacher relational variables may actually be caused by student processes and outcomes rather than the other way around… Teachers may behave in empathic ways to students who participate, which in turn may increase student participation, setting up a mutually beneficial cycle" (p. 133). He calls this insight "not just a limitation" on his findings but "an important idea" in its own right. Yet it is arguably obscured by his conclusion that "learner-centered" student-teacher relationships are "effective."

[30] They also restricted their sample to studies that measure the quality of student-teacher relationships "at the dyadic level" because "research has shown that the quality of [teacher-student relationships] differs across children in the classroom" (Roorda *et al.*, 2011, p. 500).

[31] *Id.*, pp. 498-499. The conceptual distinctions and hypotheses discussed in this paragraph can all be found on those pages.

[32] *Id.*, pp. 510, 513.

[33] *Id.*, p. 515.

[34] *Id.*

[35] *Id.*, p. 517.

[36] *See* discussion *id.*, p. 518.

[37] *Id.*, pp. 518-519.

[38] *Id.*, p. 520.

[39] *See, e.g.*, Labaree, 1997.

[40] *See* Phillips, 1997, pp. 656-657. The quotations in this paragraph are drawn from those pages.

[41] *Id.*, pp. 648-649.

[42] *Id.*, p. 640.

[43] *See, e.g.*, Coalition for Evidence-based Policy, 2003.

[44] *See, e.g.,* Clay, 2010.

[45] Lee Cronbach has made a similar argument about the difference between the information policymakers need and the information parents need. "On the issue of effectiveness of Catholic versus public schools, for example, Cronbach notes that policymakers need information at a high level of generalization; parents, on the other hand, need to evaluate *this* Catholic school against *that* public school. It may well be that one mode of research is better designed for a particular purpose than the other, or it could be that both modes are useful to both groups in different ways" (Noddings, 2016, citing Cronbach, 1982).

[46] *See, e.g.*, Mjøset, 2009.

[47] Pawson, 2006.

[48] Moss & Haertel, 2015, p. 208, quoting Byrne, 2013, p. 291 and citing Pawson, 2006. Byrne supplies the "elsewhere" and "elsewhen" language.

[49] Moss & Haertel, 2015, p. 209

[50] *See* Merton, 1949.

[51] *Id.*, p. 448.

[52] *Id.*, pp. 457-458.

[53] George & Bennett, 2005, p. 266. Note that George & Bennett are political scientists; the examples they offer are situated within the field of international relations.

[54] *Id.*, pp. 268-269.

[55] *Id.*, p. 285.

[56] McDonald, Bowman, & Brayko, 2013.

[57] *Id.*, p. 12.

[58] *Id.*, p. 17.

[59] *Id.*, p. 18.

[60] *Id.*, pp. 19-21.

[61] *Id.*, p. 26. The observations and quotations in this paragraph are drawn from the discussion in pp. 25-26.

[62] *Id.*, pp. 27-30.

[63] Not all biases, of course, are unconscious or unwanted. Some biases reflect theoretical orientations, perspectives, or lenses that the researchers have intentionally adopted; in that case, the researchers will generally acknowledge the bias without trying to mitigate it. Moreover, it is important to recognize that some features of a study design that might "bias" the analysis may also strengthen it. For instance, McDonald, Bowman, and Brayko point out that their "insider status" within the teacher preparation program they studied—and their role in designing the innovation at the center of the study—was in many ways advantageous. In particular, they argue that their analysis was enriched by their depth of knowledge about the context of the innovation and by their ease of access to a wealth of data sources (in the form of colleagues, students, course materials, etc.).

[64] *Id.*, p. 9. The analytic procedures described in this paragraph are all discussed on pp. 9-11.

[65] It seems plausible to suppose that dutifully enacting the steps of iterative "coding," checking "inter-coder reliability," "triangulating," and so on really can prevent some instances of unwarranted generalization or help reveal evidence that would have been overlooked. Ultimately, though, insightful analysis is the product not of the procedures themselves but of the thinking and discussion they are meant to enable. Personally, I am not entirely convinced that the formal analytic methods that have accumulated within the most prevalent traditions of case study research actually enhance the quality of researchers' thinking.

[66] Subjectivity is not a special problem for qualitative analysis. Different researchers working with statistical data will favor different statistical measures, build different statistical models, and interpret the models they build differently. *See* George & Bennett, 2005, p. 30 ("The misguided focus on case studies' supposed 'degrees of freedom' problem has diverted attention from a more fundamental problem of indeterminacy that affects all research methods, even experimental methods. This is the problem that evidence, whether from a case or a database, can be equally consistent with a large or even infinite number of alternative theories.").

[67] This somewhat vague formulation is intended only to suggest one alternative to the unrealistic requirement that a valid case analysis offer the single best explanation of the case. It is not intended as a comprehensive statement of all criteria by which the quality of empirical research (or case studies) might fairly be judged. Such criteria might include, for instance, standards related to transparency about the study's design, the clarity of the writing (including precise definitions of key analytic terms), the

sufficiency of the evidence marshaled in support of the author's claims, explicit consideration of alternative explanations and disconfirming evidence, and the extent to which the interpretations offered are surprising. For a thought-provoking dialogue across different perspectives on which standards of quality should be "privileged" in evaluating educational research, see Moss *et al.*, 2009. My own perspective tends to privilege what Fred Erickson referred to in that dialogue as "educational imagination," which he defines as the quality of addressing "curriculum, pedagogy, and school organization in ways that shed light on—not *prove* but rather *illuminate*, make us smarter about—the limits and possibilities for what practicing educators might do in making school happen on a daily basis" (*id.*, p. 504). Erickson stresses that conducting research with educational imagination entails working from (and toward) a "critical vision of ends as well as of means towards ends" and "going beyond matters of short-term 'effects' that are easily and cheaply measured."

[68] *See, e.g.*, Eisenhart, 2009.

[69] See *id.*, on the concept of "theoretical generalization." *See also* Mjøset, 2009, p. 53 ("Specification and generalization are not opposites. Specification is only possible through more general knowledge.").

[70] The term "preparation for future learning" is most commonly associated with a 1999 essay by Bransford and Schwartz titled, "Rethinking Transfer." Bransford and Schwartz argue that the concept of transfer should include not only direct application of previously acquired knowledge and skill, but also all the ways in which past experience might give rise to the questions, assumptions, and motivations that influence participation in subsequent learning activities. They suggest that including such "preparation for future learning" in our conception of transfer might help justify the value of learning experiences that have difficult-to-measure short-term benefits, such as "lived experiences" (e.g. study-abroad) and extensive study of the arts and humanities.

[71] *See* Flyvbjerg, 2001, especially chapters 2 and 4. Flyvbjerg acknowledges heavy debts to Pierre Bourdieu, to whom he attributes the phrase "virtuoso social performer." However, he traces his argument about the limited utility of general propositions and the importance of experience with particulars all the way back to Aristotle's discussion of a virtue the Greeks called *phronesis*. The term translates roughly as "practical intelligence" and connotes a capacity for wise and deliberate action. According to Aristotle (via Flyvbjerg), the important thing about *phronesis* is that it "can never be equated with or reduced to knowledge of general truths" (*id.*, p. 57).

[72] *Id.*, chapters 5 and 6.

[73] *Id.*, p. 4.

[74] *Id.*, pp. 84-87.

[75] Schwandt, Straf, & Prewitt, 2012, p. 50.

[76] Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 139.

[77] *Id.*, p. 86.

[78] *See, e.g.*, Schwandt, Straf, & Prewitt, 2012, p. 50. ["The approach of evidence-based policy and practice assumes that there is an agreement among policy makers and researchers on what the desired ends of policy should be. 'The main contribution of social science research is to help identify and select the appropriate means to reach the goal.' (Weiss, 1979, p. 427)]

[79] Flyvbjerg, 2001, chapter 5.

[80] Bradshaw, 2009.

[81] Eisner, 1997, p. 268.

[82] *Id.*, p. 264.

[83] Eisner famously debated this point with Howard Gardner in a lively panel at the 1996 meeting of the American Educational Research Association. *See* Saks, 1996.

[84] Eisner (1997) wrote that "our work must go well beyond what a good journalist—or even a good writer—is able to do. After all, we are expected to bring to the educational situation a theoretical and analytical background in the field of education. That background must count for something in the way in which phenomena are characterized, analyzed, and assessed" (p. 267).

[85] Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3

[86] *Id.*, p. 10.

[87] *Id.*, p. 9.

[88] Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 18.

[89] *Id.*, p. 60, citing Bourdieu, 1990, p. 28.

[90] *Id.*, p. 63.

Epilogue

Keeping the conversation going

I think I had better stop there. I do not want to become too fantastic. I want to know primarily whether anything in my inward thinking, as I have tried to describe it, speaks to anything in your experience of the classroom as you have lived it, and if so, what the meanings are that exist for you in your experience.

- Carl Rogers

There is so much more to discuss, but I won't presume to know where you'd like to take the conversation next. We could continue thinking about what's at stake in characterizing the ideal student-teacher relationships as "caring," "trusting," "supportive," "close," "familial," and so on. We could drill down on any one of the handful of strategies we've already considered for improving the quality of student-teacher relationships, or we could entertain other proposals that interest you. Perhaps the argument in the last chapter about learning from stories has reminded you of a book, movie, or personal experience that you now want to revisit. My hope is that by this point, I have said enough to prompt some sort of response that you will want to pursue in your own way. However, as one last exhortation to further dialogue, I thought I'd share some musings that recall where our conversation has led us and indicate where it might yet go. Although the brief provocations that follow will bring us to the end of the dissertation, they are intended as conversation-extenders, rather than conclusions.

Musing #1: Joint intellectual activity as a relational practice

Most of the theoretical perspectives we've examined frame emotional bonding between teachers and students as a cause of students' engagement in school. That causal ordering is often implicit in claims like "You have to have a relationship first" or "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care." Yet we might expect the causal arrow to point in the other direction, too. It's not just that if you have the relationship first, it becomes easier to engage students in challenging intellectual activity; we form social attachments in the first place through joint participation in engrossing projects. Strong student-teacher relationships may be as much a consequence as a cause of students' academic engagement.

Nel Noddings, among others, makes this point to rebut the charge that prioritizing "care" for students represents a turn away from schools' mission to "train the intellect."[1] She points out that one of the things we do when we care for others is invite them to join us in some of the intellectually vital activities that we value. We do this because we want to help them develop the competencies they may need to pursue their own life projects And we do it, of course, because their participation enhances our own experience of the activities we enjoy. Indeed, inviting such participation is one way of communicating care to another person. To tweak that famous aphorism: students know that we care (in part) because we care what they know. Noddings thus urges us to see intellectual engagement as a means toward the end of relational engagement, rather than vice versa.

Understanding joint intellectual activity as integral to the maintenance of caring relationships has lots of ramifications, but I am especially interested in the implications for teacher education. We've seen that a powerful trend in teacher education is to specify a set of core pedagogical practices that can be rehearsed and, in principle, mastered before a new teacher takes responsibility for a classroom.[2] The inclusion of one or more "relational practices" among the core teaching competencies might be taken as evidence of teacher educators' attentiveness to the affective and relational dimensions of teaching. Yet it also reflects (and reinforces) the tendency to view relationship-building as a self-contained domain of pedagogical practice, separate and distinct from tasks like curriculum design, lesson planning, and leading class discussions. If, on the other hand,

we began with the premise that ethically defensible relationships are the primary goal of schooling, then we might begin to see teachers' work toward subsidiary goals—not least the work of engaging students intellectually—as embodying relational practices too. Thus, prioritizing new teachers' preparation for the relational work of teaching may well lead us to a renewed focus on teachers' intellectual engagement with content.

For decades, teacher-educators and policymakers have wrestled with the challenge of producing teachers who know their subjects well. They have tried requiring or encouraging prospective teachers to complete an undergraduate major in a subject they will be teaching (rather than a major in education), instituting tougher teacher licensing exams that require candidates to demonstrate more comprehensive content knowledge, and aggressively recruiting "high-achieving" college students into the profession through post-baccalaureate programs and other alternative routes. At the same time, one of the foundational premises of teacher education is that content knowledge is insufficient—that it must be augmented by specialized professional knowledge of how to represent content and disciplinary practices to learners,[3] how to manage a classroom, and how to form productive relationships with students and parents. Given the division of labor between schools of education and the rest of the university, it is all too easy to lose sight of the connection between teachers' intellectual engagement with content and their ability to build caring relationships. In some cases, a prospective teacher's "love of content" may even be seen as a barrier, rather than a bridge, to connecting with students emotionally.[4]

Perhaps what is needed, then, are approaches to teacher education that reframe the breadth and depth of teachers' knowledge and curiosity as a resource for relationship-building. In broad terms, the idea would be for prospective teachers to actually experience joint intellectual activity[5] as a context for interpersonal bonding. The challenge is to make this idea more concrete—and to make space for it within (and outside) the existing structures of the university.

Musing #2: Emotional self-regulation as a teaching challenge

I also wonder if we've paid enough attention to the influence of teachers' temperament and emotions on their interactions with students. When we explain the variation in individual teachers' success at forming productive classroom relationships, we tend to focus on their practices (e.g., specific instructional routines) and beliefs (e.g., conceptions of their professional role). But teachers are not always enacting consciously chosen practices or acting on expressly held beliefs. Often, they are reacting to students spontaneously and emotionally, in ways that don't necessarily reflect their intentions. In all cases, they are coping with the stresses of responding to dozens of young people, with different personalities and needs, often all at once. As Herb Kohl points out, that stress is compounded by the investment of the teacher's ego in students' responses to them.[6] Thus, I suspect that teachers' varying temperaments—and especially the ways they regulate their emotions under stressful conditions—may account for much of the variability in the quality of the relationships they build with students.

This suggests that we might be able to strengthen teachers' interpersonal efforts by attending supportively to their *intra*personal psychological processes. Some of that support might be provided by school psychologists or other clinicians, but most of it is probably supplied informally by colleagues, mentors, family, and friends. One objective in establishing a school's professional culture might be to create an atmosphere where teachers can talk honestly about their emotional responses to students and the stresses of caring for them. This proposition is trickier than it sounds, as there is a fine line between encouraging openness and enabling a counter-productive, group-reinforced negativity to take root. On the other hand, it seems important to avoid driving teachers' attempts to process negative experiences and emotions underground. Presumably, what we need is a professional culture that helps teachers cope with however they do feel, rather than telling them how they should feel.

Finding ways to facilitate communication among teachers around their shared responsibility for students has long been a priority for school leaders and education researchers. Perhaps one specific focus of that initiative could be on fostering constructive dialogue about the emotional challenges of relating to students, rather than

portraying good relationships (simply) as the product of good intentions and good practice. As an initial step, it may be useful to imagine what that sort of dialogue would look like—and to consider why it might be elusive.

Musing #3: The "child's ecology" as an alternative frame

The recognition that teachers' interactions with each other can influence the quality of their interactions with students is one example of a point I flagged back in the prologue: it is impossible to isolate the "student-teacher relationship" from the larger web of social relationships in which school-aged children are enmeshed. Urie Bronfenbrenner called this web the "child's ecology," and he warned against trying to reduce any developmentally-significant relationship to a "two-person system only."[7] With Bronfenbrenner's admonition in mind, I promised that our discussion of student-teacher relationships would keep the broader social ecology at least sporadically in view.

And so it did, to a limited extent. For instance, in discussing Attachment Theory, I noted that the concept of a "relational schema"—the sensitivities and expectations that people bring to each new relationship based on previous experience—has been used to link the quality of student-teacher relationships with the quality of parent-child relationships.[8] Our discussion of students' "need to belong" as a precondition to learning explored the influence of social identity—perceptions of where we fit into the broader society—on students' emotional needs and teachers' capacity to respond to them.[9] All of Chapter 2 situates student-teacher dynamics within the vast web of relationships we call the "education system," taking us from a two-person model to a model with far too many people to count.

Yet despite these nods toward the big picture, our discussion has ignored or underplayed many of the interactions between student-teacher relationships and other relationships of interest. We have hardly discussed, for instance, teachers' role in fostering positive peer relationships among their students. We haven't begun to address the role of teachers and schools in facilitating relationships between young people and

adults outside of school. And the dynamics of teacher-parent relationships have received no attention at all.

Of course, I did have my reasons for framing our conversation around "student-teacher relationships." For one thing, I wanted to respond to the stories and insights I was hearing from educators at Eagle Rock and MEC, who seemed eager to highlight the unique importance of relationships between individual teachers and individual students. Second, even if the interactions within any given student-teacher dyad are inevitably shaped by countless other intersecting relationships, it does not seem unreasonable to point to the student-teacher dyad itself as a basic unit of experience for school-aged youth. It also seemed reasonable to suggest that student-teacher relationships entail certain generic challenges and opportunities, which merit sustained attention.

Nonetheless, I can't help but wonder how the conversation might have unfolded if we had begun with a broader focus on "social relationships" in human development rather than "student-teacher relationships" per se. In that case, we would have modeled the school as a complex set of nested and interlocking social systems, itself nested within larger systems. Perhaps some particular sub-systems (e.g. student-teacher or peer relationships) would have emerged as especially important. More likely, interactions among the different sub-systems would have taken center stage. Maybe the same policy interventions we considered in Chapter 2 would have come up anyway; then again, it's possible that starting with a more ecological perspective on youth development would have made other strategies more salient. For instance, we might have paid more attention to strategies involving parental involvement, school-community partnerships, or multi-age groupings of students.

The key premise of an ecological perspective is that all the social sub-systems in a young person's environment are affected by an intervention in any of them.   So rather than targeting a particular kind of relationship as a focus of school reform, we might have tried instead to understand various policy proposals in terms of their impacts on all the relationships that shape development. As we've seen, it is possible to examine practically any hot topic in education—curricula, grading, "classroom management," school lunch, school choice, standardized testing, teacher licensure, multicultural

education, and so on—through a relational lens. Bronfenbrenner would just suggest that our relational lens have a wide angle.

Musing #4: The challenge to care as the challenge to embrace uncertainty

The reference to Bronfenbrenner serves as a reminder that our conversation is not remotely new. It was in 1974 that Bronfenbrenner called schools "one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society" because they tend to isolate kids from the rich social life of the larger community.[10] By that time, Carl Rogers was already a prominent voice urging a radical rethinking of the relationship between student and teacher, and William Glasser was emerging as another such voice.[11] Their influence was not solely theoretical. For a time, programs, practices, and policies inspired by Rogers and Glasser proliferated in schools; Glasser himself worked directly with and in schools for many decades. Since the 1980s, Nel Noddings's vision of schools as "caring communities" has been widely read, cited, and (in some circles) embraced.[12] An entire movement has gathered behind Deborah Meier's attempts over the past quarter-century to create small schools where young people can learn "in the company" of adults whom they respect and admire.[13]

So there is a history here. Exploring its episodes and its arcs would have been instructive. For instance: What was it actually like to teach and learn in one of Glasser's "Quality Schools"? What compromised the efforts by Meier and others to scale up autonomous small schools by creating parallel systems within large urban school districts? Under what cultural and political conditions do agendas aiming to transform student-teacher relationships gain or lose momentum?   How have ideas about the importance and improvement of student-teacher relationships evolved over time in light of experience?

And then there's this big question that should give pause to any proponent of fundamental change in schools: after all this time, why have calls to reorient schools toward the cultivation of positive relationships seemingly achieved so little? Why are the schools that Rogers, Glasser, Noddings, and Meier envisioned so rare? Why are schools

as vulnerable today as they were half a century ago to the charge that they are "breeding grounds for alienation" rather than sites of intergenerational bonding?

Explaining the stability of school structures and practices in the face of persistent efforts to "reform" them is something of a cottage industry among historians of education. One set of explanations can be found in an essay by David Tyack and William Tobin titled, "The 'grammar' of schooling: Why has it been so hard to change?" Tyack and Tobin examine a series of attempts from the 1920s through the 1960s to transform schools by challenging some of their entrenched patterns of schools organization, such as single-age classrooms and the division of instruction into standard academic subjects. They suggest that these challenges generally failed in the long run in part because "habit is a labor-saving device."[14] For teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers, institutionalized organizational practices have always offered a measure of clarity and predictability regarding their respective roles and responsibilities. Changing them in a single school—let alone at scale—requires an extraordinary commitment, not only among reformers but across the communities they serve.

The inertial force of labor-saving habit offers an especially plausible explanation for why reformers focused on improving the quality of student-teacher relationships have had such limited success. Arguably, any meaningful move toward prioritizing relationships in schools would increase complexity and uncertainty for all involved. After all, our most valued interpersonal relationships are rarely marked by rigidly defined roles and responsibilities, or by codified rules and expectations. While some minimum of consistency and predictability may indeed be conducive to good student-teacher relationships, the ideal relationship probably requires a greater tolerance for messiness, uncertainty, and spontaneous negotiation than professional educators (and students and parents) are accustomed to. As my informants at MEC told me, sustaining "relationships" with students means coping with constant uncertainty about "boundaries" (even if certain limits are clear enough). Not knowing exactly if we're saying or doing the right thing is an inevitable part of the experience of caring for someone. Perhaps the stiffest challenge for reformers like Rogers, Glasser, Meier, and Noddings was to convince people to accept that kind of uncertainty as essential to good schools.

Final musing: Success as its own danger

Tyack and Tobin also point generally to political headwinds as a challenge for reformers who have tried to change the most basic organizational patterns of schooling. They note, for instance, that by the mid-1970's, recent reforms affording more curricular freedom and flexibility in high schools were blamed for the (perceived) decline in school discipline and academic performance, prompting legislators to roll back the reforms and impose more of the "old" kind of structure.[15] Likewise, many contemporary advocates of student-teacher relationships as a priority for schooling would claim that they, too, are flying against the political winds. Both Meier and Noddings, for example, have highlighted conflicts between the policies and ideologies of standards-based reform and the aspiration to foster meaningful intergenerational bonding at school. They argue that the intensification of external efforts to control what happens in schools has made it harder for teachers to be the creative and caring adults that young people need them to be.

On the other hand, outright opposition to the idea of prioritizing student-teacher relationships is relatively rare, though not unheard of. We've seen that there are some philosophical objections to Noddings' conception of "care" as an ethical ideal for relationships outside the home.[16] And some critics of initiatives to make schools more responsive to students' emotional needs worry that a (misguided) therapeutic mission is starting to supplant schools' educational mandate.[17] But educators and policymakers who embrace standards-based reform tend also to embrace a renewed focus on relationships as a worthy and compatible goal. It is indeed hard to imagine a more mainstream position than the notion that student-teacher relationships are key to improving schools. Relationships are regularly named, along with rigor and relevance, as one of the new "three r's" for "twenty-first century schools."[18] Conceivably, "relationship-based reform"—or something to that effect—could soon join "standards-based reform" and "student-centered instruction" in the pantheon of modern educational slogans.

What then? Substantial resources might be invested in academic research, teacher workshops, curriculum development, and pilot programs to advance the relationship-based reform agenda. Districts and states might enact new mandates requiring schools to

file plans and reports detailing their progress toward some relational benchmark—like ensuring that every student has at least one positive relationship with an adult in the school or devoting at least *x* hours per week to relationship-building activities. High-stakes evaluations of teachers might expand to include assessments of their skill in building productive relationships with students, as rated by observers or by students themselves. My guess is that some of these reforms would be salutary, some would leave the conditions that constrain student-teacher relationships fundamentally unaltered, and some would actually worsen those conditions. Sudden, spectacular results on a large scale are rare in education reform. So when, after a decade or so of relationship-based reform, we see only spotty improvement in schools, policymakers and the public may well judge the experiment passé and move on to something else.

The broader point is that the education system has a way of nominally absorbing big ideas while effectively neutralizing them.[19] And the danger is that the idea of focusing on student-teacher relationships could succeed just well enough to be incorporated into the currently dominant paradigms of school reform, stripped of its power to challenge prevailing practice and distorted to the point where it may even do harm. I say this not to indulge an idle cynicism about "the system," but to sharpen our sense of purpose. Our task, I think, is not to replace the old slogans with new ones touting the importance of relationships. It is to replace slogans with conversations.

Chapter Notes

[1] *See* discussion in Chapter 1, pp. 60-64 (citing Noddings, 1984, p. 173 and Noddings, 1992, pp. 10-19).

[2] *See* discussion in Chapter 2, pp. 102-104 (citing Forzani, 2014 and Grossman et al., 2009).

[3] Teacher educators refer to knowledge of how to teach specific content as "pedagogical content knowledge" or "content knowledge for teaching." Such knowledge is supposed to be distinct from—and to unite—knowledge of the subject-matter itself and knowledge of generic pedagogical strategies. Since the 1980s, the idea that good teachers have developed repertoires of strategies for representing particular concepts to students has become an influential tenet of teacher education. The idea is most frequently attributed to Lee Shulman (1987).

[4] *See* Grossman, 1989.

[5] I hope these references to "intellectual activity" will be understood as broadly as possible. John Dewey (1899) famously argued that deep immersion in any of the "occupations" that meet the exigencies of life inevitably involve the mind as well as the hand, thinking as well as doing. "It is through these occupations," he observed, "that the intellectual and emotional interpretation of nature has been developed." Thus, an activity need not be "purely intellectual" to be intellectually stimulating; indeed, it is more likely to be intellectually stimulating if it appeals "to our impulses and tendencies to make, to do, to create, to produce, whether in the form of utility or of art."

[6] *See* Chapter 1, pp. 30-31 (citing Kohl, 1984, pp. 66-69).

[7] *See* Prologue, pp. 18-19 (citing Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

[8] *See* Chapter 1, p. 34 (citing Davis, 2010, pp. 209-210).

[9] *See* discussion in Chapter 1, pp. 42-47.

[10] Bronfenbrenner, 1974b, p. 60.

[11] *See* Chapter 1, pp. 51-57.

[12] *See* Chapter 1., pp. 57-67.

[13] *See* Chapter 2, pp. 90-99.

[14] Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 476.

[15] *Id.*, p. 475.

[16] *See* discussion in Chapter 1, pp. 64-67.

[17] *See* brief discussion in Chapter 1, p. 47 (citing Ecclestone, 2007).

[18] DeWitt, 2012.

[19] *See* Tyack & Tobin, 1994, p. 478 ("Reformers believe that their innovations will change schools, but it is important to recognize that schools change reforms.").

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