

Summer 2018

The power of one: How promoting positive student-teacher relationships in the classroom can impact teacher wellness and burnout

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The Power of One:
How Promoting Positive Student-Teacher Relationships in the Classroom
Can Impact Teacher Wellness and Burnout

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A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Educational Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

August 2018

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Abstract

Previous research has offered understanding of resiliency factors in the classroom setting to create and enhance student-teacher relationships (STR). Additionally, numerous studies have examined public school teachers' burnout across the three areas of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment. Few studies, however, have combined these two research areas to better understand the relationship between them. This study uses intervention methods to provide 2nd-grade to 5th-grade teachers in one elementary school in Central Virginia applicable and efficient ways to build student-teacher relationships in the classroom and reduce their job-related stress. Pre- and post-intervention data was collected across two measures, evaluating participants' current knowledge and practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors and their current feelings of burnout. Analysis of results examines differences and change in scores after the intervention was implemented. As one of very few intervention studies examining student-teacher relationship (STR) behaviors and its impact on teacher wellness, suggestions for future research are included, as well as specific implications for those in the field of school psychology.

Introduction

If asked to remember a favorite teacher in school, most everyone can recall a teacher who challenged them, empathized with them, or made them feel comfortable in the classroom. These connections between teachers and students are an integral part of the school climate and contribute to higher student achievement, more positive workplace emotions, and lower dropout rates (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Whether inside or outside of school, young people need positive and healthy experiences with adults. They not only need supervision and accountability, but also someone to talk to about problems, push them to their full potential, and encourage them in times of self-doubt. The United States has an average graduation rate between 68 and 71 percent (Swanson, 2004). This means that one-third of all public high school students are dropping out before graduation. Of students who dropped out before graduating high school, the 2006 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation report found that 56 percent of dropout students reported feeling unable to go to a school staff person for school problems (Bridgeland, DiJulio, & Morrison, 2006).

Sixty-two percent of the students reported that their school needed to place more emphasis on supporting students who faced problems outside of school. They referenced individual attention from teachers, including specific behaviors such as, getting students involved in lessons, positive praise, and recognizing students in class, as being preferred methods for teachers to interact with their students (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Doll (2010) researched resilient factors in classrooms and promoted a model for best practice teaching and creating positive classroom climate. She identified teacher-student relationships as a primary element in the positive climate of classrooms and

teachers' roles. She believed that by incorporating these factors into school experiences, students build resiliency both in and outside the classroom. Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004) identified specific teacher-student relationship behaviors, which include showing an interest in students, building a safe and secure classroom environment, and establishing good rapport with students.

Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman (2003) found that students' relationships with their teachers predicted their adjustment to school through the 4th-grade and could predict their behavior adjustment through middle school. Additionally, supportive relationships with students were found to positively influence teachers' professional and personal wellbeing as well as their emotional state. Positive relationships between students and teachers are beneficial to students *and* associated with happier teachers and more positive teaching practices in the classroom (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011).

If teachers are more optimistic and confident in the classroom, they are likely to create a better learning environment for students. Their satisfaction in the classroom can also serve as a protective factor against emotional exhaustion and feelings of professional burnout (Milatz, Loftenegger, & Schober, 2015). Burnout is defined as chronic stress characterized by three primary components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment (Sharp & Jennings, 2015).

Student-teacher relationship factors, and their potential to improve the classroom for both students and teachers are highlighted next.

Literature Review

Characteristics of Student-Teacher Relationships

Doll et al. (2004) compared the importance of positive relationships between students and teachers as being similar to the attachment formed between a child and their primary caregiver early in life. An ideal secure attachment allows the child to seek comfort but also have confidence to explore. Similarly, if students develop a trusting and empathetic relationship with their teacher, they are more likely to take risks and challenge themselves in the classroom. Doll emphasized the need for these relationship characteristics at all grade levels.

These characteristics include the use of *active listening skills* and *rappor building* with students individually or as a whole group to practice empathy. Teachers can use *constructive feedback* and keep *high expectations* as a way to provide students structure and maintain a supportive learning environment. Teachers may also set up times of the day or week for students to check-in and build *positive peer interactions*. Additionally, *incorporating fun* and personal expression into lesson plans can create a positive classroom setting and strong student-teacher relationships (Doll et al., 2004).

Pianta (2001) researched and developed programs to evaluate and build positive student-teacher relationships in the classroom. He identified this as an important protective factor for students' school experience and created rating scales and specific programs aimed at fostering these behaviors in schools. Pianta (2001) created the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)*, a self-report form designed to measure a teacher's perception of conflict, closeness, and dependency in their relationship with a particular student. He also helped to create the *Banking Time* program, which offers

specific techniques to build individual interaction with students (Driscoll & Pianta, 2010). Additionally, he developed the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS) as an observational instrument to assess classroom quality, specifically in student-teacher interactions (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). These methods require extensive training and time commitments from teachers. Therefore, alternative methods are needed to gauge current practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors and efficiently promote these behaviors in schools.

Student-Teacher Relationships through Grade Levels

It is understandable that this relationship between a child and their teacher will evolve and change developmentally as the student matures. The student-teacher relationship often resembles that of a caregiver to younger students, offering a high degree of warmth and trust in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms (Baker, 2006). There is typically more emotional intensity between students and teachers during the elementary school years opposed to secondary grade levels (Spilt et al., 2011).

Middle school students begin to experience more transition in their schedules and spend less time with a single homeroom teacher throughout the day. This schedule can make strong student-teacher relationships more difficult, but should not devalue a student's need for a supportive relationship during their middle school years (Baker, 2006). Middle school teachers were reported to be positive supports for students in need when they displayed characteristics of emotional warmth, personal connection, acceptance, and availability. These positive attributes were found to be a leading contributor to students' positive peer relationships and academic achievement in their middle school years (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

The high school environment can present exceptional challenges to building positive relationships in the classroom. Students make frequent transitions between classes and extra-curricular activities as they gain more independence. They experience more internalizing and externalizing stress, such as changing social relationships and post-graduation pressure. A positive relationship with a teacher can serve as a protective factor for at-risk students, especially for those who may not have similar supports at home (Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2011).

Teachers who expand their responsibilities to coaching, directing, or sponsorship roles have additional opportunities to engage with students and build quality relationships outside the classroom. While additional job functions are not always possible or preferred responsibilities for teachers, Doll et al. (2004) recommends alternatively creating a designated time during class to “check-in” with students about their academic, personal, or social concerns. Despite situational and temporal factors of the school day, teachers have the potential to engage in supportive and empathetic connections with their students at any grade level.

Academic and Social Impact

The student-teacher relationship plays an integral role in a student’s life at school, both as a foundation for other social relationships and for their successful academic functioning in the classroom. According to Bridgeland et al. (2006), the primary reason students dropped out of school was that classes were not interesting. As Doll et al. (2004) notes, high quality student-teacher relationships exhibited in the classroom should include efforts to engage students in the material and incorporate personal interests in the lessons.

These relationships allow students to fully engage in academic content and learn through key developmental processes (Baker, 2006). As attachment theory has demonstrated, students who feel a sense of security with an adult are more confident to explore their environment and challenge themselves in new circumstances (Doll et al., 2004). Students who have a positive relationship with their teacher may feel better equipped to take risks in academic work, apply themselves to a task, and ask questions if they need more assistance.

Hamre and Pianta (2006) found that positive student-teacher relationships helped students adapt to norms, routines, and expectations of the classroom and predict students' social development and work-related habits. Finding a positive relationship between this in-school attachment and these achievement skills further supports the enhancing quality relationships can have on students' performance in the classroom.

Additionally, a positive relationship with a teacher has been identified as a protective factor for students at risk for a special education referral or grade level retention. These at-risk students were found to have more academic engagement and show improved achievement when they had a supportive and trustworthy teacher in their lives. At-risk students who did not have this kind of relationship at school were later referred for special education services or retained (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Recently, school psychologists have placed an increased emphasis on understanding students' social and emotional functioning within the school setting. Teachers are better equipped to understand how a child's emotional regulation impacts learning in the classroom just as much as foundational knowledge predicts academic success (Doll, 2010). With greater emphasis on social-emotion learning, peer

relationships, and problem solving skills, especially in the early elementary years, it is critical to examine the impact a quality student-teacher relationship can have on students' progress in these areas.

When a teacher engages in an empathetic relationship with a student, they offer the student a chance to develop a style in which to interact with both their peers and other adults. Students who reported greater connectedness with their teachers reported lower levels of emotional distress, suicide ideation, suicidal behavior, violence, substance abuse, and early sexual activity (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Teacher Wellness Today

As mentioned before, these positive relationships not only benefit students' school experience, but also have been cited as the most important source of enjoyment and motivation within teachers' roles (Spilt et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand how more tenuous or strained relationships can induce more stress for teachers. Clunies-Ross, Little, and Kienhuis (2008) found that teachers often spend extraordinary amounts of time addressing behavior concerns using reactive and often ineffective strategies. This practice increases stress levels without reducing the problem behavior.

Additionally, teachers are asked to design lesson plans around a fast-paced, restricted curriculum getting students to achieve a passing score on standardized exams, and manage classroom behavior, while also addressing individual learning needs of students. Many teachers serve students in impoverished areas, requiring them to engage hungry, tired, or anxiety-ridden learners. With increased demands, more expectations,

and students' unresolved problems entering the classroom, teacher burnout poses a great threat to our school systems and the students they serve.

As Kipps-Vaughan (2013) highlights, teachers' increased stress levels prevent them from being emotionally available and present for their students. A teacher's quality of instruction can suffer, along with students' academic achievement, when teachers have poor emotional wellbeing (Milatz et al., 2015). It is for these reasons that student-teacher relationships must be further explored and better understood as a vehicle to creating a positive classroom environment for both students and their teachers.

Research has been conducted regarding teachers' working relationships with co-workers and school administration (Frisby, Goodboy, & Buckner, 2015) but few studies have examined positive student-teacher relationships and the impact they can have on teachers' stress level and burnout rate.

Externalizing behaviors have been identified as most disruptive to forming a positive student-teacher relationship. It is key to acknowledge how these behaviors can be better managed and responded to through strong foundational relationships in the classroom. Building a trusting and empathetic relationship with the student may help guide discipline and behavior in the classroom overall (Baker, 2006). As Spilt et al. (2011) identified, this practice ultimately leads to a more positive work setting, reduces teachers' stress response to certain behaviors, and may help maintain teacher wellbeing over time.

Some teachers may be hesitant to engage in the aforementioned relational factors because they do not see this as a function of their role (Spilt et al., 2011). Other teachers may not be aware of the reciprocal benefits espoused from these relationships and some

may prefer to save their energy for more mandated responsibilities (Milatz et al., 2015). While it is ultimately the teacher's decision to implement strategies and relational components into their class environment, this research provides insight for school administrators to consider when thinking about building a positive school experience for students.

Current Intervention Programs

Current understanding of student-teacher relationships in the classroom and their positive impact has come mostly from research designs that primarily use self-rating scales, as teachers rate their own relationship quality with students, often focusing on a specific student or small group of students. While ultimately feasible, these methods offer a great deal of bias to the data, as relationships may be reported more positively or negatively and may not represent a teacher's relationship with all or most of her students. Few studies have used observational data or explicit intervention methods to target these practices in the classroom. The *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)* is the closest to achieving this research design. This program uses four cycles of 20 minute observations in a classroom to evaluate the student-teacher interactions in pre-kindergarten up to secondary grade levels. This method, while involved in their analysis, require extensive training and time commitment from participants, which are not always ideal nor practical in the public school setting (Pianta et al., 2008).

With few studies using engaged, hands-on methods to assess these student-teacher relationships, more teacher wellness studies exemplify and demonstrate an intervention design. As Kipps-Vaughan, Ponsart, and Gilligan (2012) discuss, teacher intervention programs are typically more successful with the incorporation and support from the

school administration. Initial conversation with school administrators and completion of a needs assessment by teachers can secure more targeted intervention and increased participation by school staff. A particular program as evidenced by Sharp and Jennings (2015) was done in a rural area of Central Virginia targeting personal reactions to stress, stress management, and implementation of coping in the classroom. A group of 5-7 participating teachers attended up to five 60 minute sessions after the school day, as preferred by teachers on the needs assessment. These sessions included group and didactic activities, engagement with various techniques, and resources to help teachers manage their stress.

Another teacher wellness intervention program, called the *Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE)* program, used mindfulness as the foundation of the intervention (Sharp & Jennings, 2015). This is an intervention for teachers aimed at regulating emotion skills, managing stress and mindfulness, and practicing caring and listening skills. CARE is a four-day intensive training program that uses small group discussions, experiential activities, and lectures to promote teacher wellness practices and actively address burnout in educators.

These aforementioned programs demonstrate a separation of student-teacher relationship behaviors and positive teacher wellness efforts in school communities. There is need for a program that incorporates direct teaching of student-teacher relational skills, while also understanding how teacher wellness can be improved with these practices.

Rationale for Current Research

The benefits gained by both teachers and students through positive working relationships have been realized by a few school systems around the country. Hamre and

Pianta (2006) notes some schools are incorporating student-teacher relationships into their professional development curriculums and training teachers with specific techniques and strategies.

There is potential for all school systems to engage in this practice and emphasize the importance of these human connections. There is a need to better understand these relationships as they are being implemented, if at all, and learn more about how they can be enhanced for the benefit of both teachers and students.

Methodology

Participants

This research targeted general education classroom teachers across the elementary levels of 2nd-grade to 5th-grade in a rural area in Central Virginia. Teachers at these grade levels were vital candidates in this research due to the development and maturation of their students. These grade level teachers also maintained consistent contact with a primary group of students throughout the day, unlike the more transient environment of middle or high school. The results of this research are applicable to general education teachers in these specific grades.

This research opportunity was advertised to all teachers at faculty meetings, as well as through school email and fliers. Twelve total teachers signed up to participate, however, only eight teachers were eligible to complete this study in full, including attending the sessions *and* completing pre- and post-intervention surveys. All eight participants eligible for the full research study were female. Two teachers had Master-level degrees, while the other six teachers had Bachelor degrees.

Instrumentation

This researcher chose to measure participants' burnout level, as broken into three components of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, using the *Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey* (MBI-ES), found in Appendix A. Only a sample list of questions are included in Appendix A due to the copyright restrictions of this measure. This 22-item survey is a version of the original Maslach Burnout Inventory, intended to measure severity of the three burnout components in adults working in school settings. It includes nine emotional exhaustion questions, five questions examining depersonalization and eight questions regarding one's feelings of

personal accomplishment. Eligible participants for this survey include all grade level teachers, administrators and other school staff and volunteers. On average, this survey requires 10 to 15 minutes to be completed.

This measure was chosen due to its validity and popularity among previous studies examining burnout levels in educational settings. The internal consistency values for this measure, as estimated by Cronbach's coefficient alpha ($n=1,316$), produce reliability coefficients of .90 for Emotional Exhaustion, .79 for Depersonalization, and .71 for Personal Accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1997). With an ability to evaluate individual scores across the three burnout categories (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment), the MBI-ES allowed the researcher to more explicitly understand and compare participating teachers' burnout levels.

To evaluate each participating teacher's current practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors in the classroom and their general knowledge of these practices, the researcher created and administered a 27-item survey. This survey, found in Appendix B, was designed using current research on instructional practices and resiliency factors in the classroom. The items on this survey were scored to give each participant a total score out of a cumulative 79 possible points. Their total score indicated their level of understanding and current practice of the student-teacher relationship behaviors asked about on the survey.

The researcher designed and used this survey due to a lack of other available measures that assessed these same behaviors from a class-wide perspective. While there exists self-report measures that evaluate a teacher's relationship with a single student (Pianta, 2001), there were no measures readily available to evaluate knowledge and

practice of STR behaviors in a whole group setting. For this reason, few psychometric properties were considered for this measure. Instead, the survey targeted a global assessment of participants' knowledge and practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors.

Procedure

The school district's Superintendent and Special Education Director approved this research before it was advertised in the school. The district and building principal preferred this research be open to all teachers and faculty if possible. Therefore, it was advertised to all faculty in the school but pre- and post-intervention data was only collected from general education classroom teachers in 2nd-grade to 5th-grade. Participating teachers ($N=8$) were asked to complete an informed consent sheet prior to taking part in this research. Any questions they had about the research project or its methodology was answered by the researcher prior to their signing this document. Each participating teacher was then asked to complete hard-copy versions of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey* (MBI-ES) and the *General Classroom Teacher Survey*, a cumulative completion time of about 15 to 30 minutes. Participants were instructed not to include their name on any of these forms but instead included a number on the form for identification purposes. Teachers were also asked about their availability to meet for the intervention sessions.

Three one-hour-long sessions were scheduled during the spring semester of the school year. The researcher allotted about three to four weeks between each session and offered light refreshments and small items to encourage teachers to attend each meeting, although attendance was never mandated as part of their participation.

The three intervention sessions used modeling techniques, discussion questions, hands-on activities and offered resources for participating teachers to take with them. These sessions were designed by the researcher and represented an integrated program based on student-teacher relationship and classroom management research from Beth Doll, Ph.D. (2004, 2010) and Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D. (2003). These series of meetings were modeled and structured using Robert J. Marzano's *The Highly Engaged Classroom* (2011) materials and Deborah Kipps-Vaughan's wellness program for educators. The complete session agenda and activity list can be found in Appendix C.

Following the final session, participating teachers were asked to complete the *MBI-ES* once again to gain a post-intervention evaluation of their current burnout level across the three categories (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment). They were also asked to complete a follow-up *General Classroom Teachers Survey* to assess their knowledge and practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors after attending the sessions. The identifying numbers on each participant's pre-intervention measures were used on the post-intervention measures so pre- and post-intervention data could be aligned but remain confidential.

Hypotheses

Milatz et al. (2015) examined teachers' self-ratings of connection to students compared to their self-reported ratings of burnout. He found that teachers with higher rated connectedness to their students reported lower levels of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion, both components of burnout, and they report feeling more effective in their work. Based on this finding, it is hypothesized that higher rates of

burnout reported by teachers will be associated with fewer positive student-teacher relational practices in the classroom.

This research also hypothesizes that teachers who participate in this research program and attend at least one or two group meetings should demonstrate more positive student-teacher relational behaviors in their classroom. If the participating teachers attend one or two group meetings, the researcher would expect these teachers to report lower levels of burnout in their post-intervention survey.

Results

The intervention sessions in this study, as mentioned before, were created using a multitude of research and a previously implemented teacher wellness program. Some of the more engaging activities that were highly praised by participating teachers are discussed below.

In order to encourage participants to be present in each session and focus on the activities or topics, the meetings began with each individual sharing a personal high (positive comment) and personal low (more challenging comment) with the group. While this also served as a model for a daily ritual or “reboot” to alleviate stress and start the session refreshed, sharing highs and lows also served as a way to build community among the participants. The similarities among the teachers’ highs and lows appeared surprising to most of the group, as they were gently reminded that they shared common achievements and stressors in their roles.

Asking the teachers to engage in a mindfulness activity and be aware of their breathing, thoughts and full bodies in the moment elicited many positive comments and appreciation from participants. Many teachers in the group shared that they had never engaged in mindfulness activities before and enjoyed having the experience. Another activity done earlier in the first session included showing the group an optical illusion and discussing how their perspectives can change about the object without the object changing itself. This activity helped to inform teachers of how their perspectives about students could change without the student ever changing. This was a popular activity, as it elicited further discussion about teachers’ knowledge of students’ stressors at home,

mistreatment by parents, or need for medication management and how these factors are presented in the classroom, including behavior problems, inattention, and poor grades.

Finally, other popular topics in these sessions included rapport building with students and peer relations in order to build a strong classroom community. The participating teachers were especially interested in this, as they shared a strong desire to build better rapport with students and appeared eager to learn of new ways to do this with their class. A specific activity that came up in these discussions was the idea of doing a class circle to begin the day or a specific content area. A class circle allows each student to respond to a question, describe how they are feeling, or simply share a comment. The participants talked extensively about what would be most appropriate to share at each grade level (e.g. open comment, answer to specific question, etc.). Additionally, some of the participants had tried this with their students before and offered personal experience to the discussion.

Some of the more challenging activities in the sessions included watching the #iwishmyteacherknew video about a teacher who asked her students to complete the open-ended statement, "*I wish my teacher knew _____*" as a way to understand her students better. Some of the participants had heard of this teacher's movement and already viewed the video. When asked how the participating teachers felt about posing this or a similar question to their students they shared concern about incorporating this into their class and worried about handling the students' responses. Additionally, while it was a good conversation, the didactic activity that encouraged teachers to build on their constructive feedback by reviewing each other in a scenario appeared more difficult for the participants. They frequently gave routine feedback emphasizing numbers instead of

attempting more creative ways to praise the student's effort. While more difficult, this may also exemplify the need for more activities of this kind to help teachers expand outside usual routines and skills.

Finally, the researcher began a discussion regarding support for each other as a school community. Questions were posed about what the faculty does positively to support each other and what may need more improvement or attention. The feedback in this conversation was surprisingly more negative than positive, despite the faculty appearing to be a close community. It became obvious that the transition and turnover occurring in the school over the last few years had taken a toll on the faculty and their support system. This was an important conversation to have and sparked ideas that could be carried into the next school year, including holding faculty meetings in various rooms around the school to see others' classrooms, sharing a compliment jar or notebook among the faculty, and finding ways to ensure *all* faculty members receive the same information at the same time.

Overall, this group was very accepting and engaged with a majority of the activities presented in these sessions. While it would be more beneficial to reduce the amount of information that was shared in each session, the participants appeared to enjoy the various hands-on activities and discussions.

In order to compare the burnout and student-teacher relationship data collected before and after the intervention sessions, descriptive statistics were used to analyze and interpret the results of this research. The individual total scores (Table 1) and group means and standard deviations (Table 2) are reported below. With a small sample size

($N=8$) the researcher is better able to analyze individual data as well as group data.

However, this small N also limited the ability to use other formal statistical tests.

When analyzing this study's data, it is important to keep in mind that smaller scores in the burnout areas of emotional exhaustion (EE) and depersonalization (DP) are considered better or more favorable scores to demonstrate fewer reported feelings of burnout. In the burnout category of personal accomplishment (PA), a higher score demonstrates lower levels of burnout experienced by the participant. The student-teacher relationship survey was scored for each participant based on 79 possible points earned each time the survey was administered. Therefore, each participant's cumulative points earned out of 79 is reported in Table 1 below.

Each participating teacher in this study received a pre-intervention and post-intervention score for each of the three measured components of burnout and the student-teacher relationship measure. The individual scores for each participant are displayed below in Table 1 and demonstrate important individual differences across these measures.

Table 1

Individual Scores for Burnout and Student-Teacher Relationships on Pre- and Post-Intervention Measures

N		Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	Depersonalization (DP)	Personal Accomplishment (PA)	Student- Teacher Relationship (STR)
1	Pre	8	1	36	59
	Post	9	0	36	58
2	Pre	23	1	42*	67*
	Post	27	1	45*	71*
3	Pre	29*	2	29*	50*

	Post	28*	5	30*	62*
4	Pre	16	1	39*	61*
	Post	26	0	47*	67*
5	Pre	30*	4	42*	66*
	Post	25*	4	44*	75*
6	Pre	28*	2	47*	66
	Post	12*	2	48*	63
7	Pre	26*	0	40	59*
	Post	18*	0	34	67*
8	Pre	18	3	36*	62*
	Post	20	3	38*	66*

Note. *Denotes positive change in pre- and post-intervention scores among each participant.

In analyzing the individual total scores for each measure, it is clear that more significant changes occurred across the student-teacher relationship (STR) survey scores. Six of the eight participants increased their STR total scores by an average of 7.1 points, while the remaining two participants had minimal decreases across the study (1-point and 3-points difference). From an item-analysis, some more drastic scores changed across various questions on this STR survey. In general, teachers reported more comfortability and knowledge of how to communicate with students about topics that may be outside their routine curriculum-based conversations. Specifically, scores on the first six questions of the STR survey increased to demonstrate teachers more frequently asked students about their personal accomplishments, stressors and families and they felt more comfortable discussing these topics and actively listening to their students' responses.

Additionally, question 13 notes teachers reported an increased knowledge of students' home life and family stressors. Participants also felt they were better able to

include students on the creation of classroom rules or assignment expectations, as all eight participants reported to do this *every time* on post-intervention STR questions 15 and 17. Finally, the participating teachers initially responded with either *Never* or *I don't know how to do this* when asked if they use relaxation techniques to deal with their job-related stress. On the post-intervention measure, all teachers reported they *occasionally* use relaxation techniques, demonstrating a positive change among the group. When asked if they use a daily ritual or “reboot” when they feel overwhelmed, half of the participants reported they do this *all the time*, while the other half of teachers reported, *I don't know how to do this*. These scores may suggest some discrepancy between understanding the skills taught and practical use of this self-care behavior.

Half of the participants in this study also reported a decrease in their emotional exhaustion (EE) scores, with an average difference of 7.5-points between pre- and post-intervention measures. The other half of participants reported higher post-intervention EE scores from a 1-point increase to a 10-point increase. Participant four, who demonstrated a 10-point difference in her pre- and post-intervention survey, reports higher scores on EE questions that specifically address physical feelings of exhaustion. While these higher scores may be a representation of this teacher's true feelings, it also may be important to consider the increased fatigue and exhaustion that accompanies the end of the year. While her post-intervention EE scores increased, it is important to note that this participant also reported positive changes in their DP, PA, and STR scores. So while she may have reported feelings of more physical and emotional exhaustion, she also reported improvements in the other areas assessed.

Six of the eight participants increased their personal accomplishment (PA) scores by an average of 2.8-points. One participant's scores did not change across the two time points evaluated. Another participant reported a 6-point decrease in her PA scores across this study. Following further examination of their change in scores, it appears their diminished level of energy, fulfillment, and overall enthusiasm for their job had decreased over this time. There is a possibility that by completing this post-intervention survey at the end of the school year, this teacher's lower scores on these PA questions may have been influenced by the fatigue that supplements the end of the school year. However, this participant still demonstrated a positive decrease in her EE scores and reported higher STR scores of the course of this study.

Each individual pair of scores on the depersonalization (DP) burnout component remained relatively consistent across the intervention with the exception of participant three. While, five of the eight participants reported the same DP score on their pre-intervention survey as their post-intervention survey, participant three increased their DP score by three points. This may be due to more negative feelings about their job-related stress at the time the post-intervention survey was completed, possibly after receiving low test results or negative feedback of some kind. After further analysis of this participant's MBI-ES responses, it was observed that this participant's ratings across three depersonalization questions increased by 1-point each, reporting they felt more negatively impacted by their job at the end of the school year. Despite these more negative feelings reported, this teacher also reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion, increased feelings of personal accomplishment and more knowledge and practice of STR behaviors.

In order to analyze possible group changes across the pre- and post-intervention data collected, the group means and standard deviations are reported in the table below across each component of burnout and the student-teacher relationship measure.

Table 2

Group Reported Burnout and Student-Teacher Relationship Scores on Pre- and Post-Intervention Measures

	Pre <i>M</i>	Pre <i>SD</i>	Post <i>M</i>	Post <i>SD</i>
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	22.25	7.2	20.63	6.7
Depersonalization (DP)	1.75	1.20	1.88	1.83
Personal Accomplishment (PA)	38.88	5.01	40.25	6.22
Student-Teacher Relationship (STR)	61.25	5.19	66.13	5.0

Based on the group data presented in Table 2, the differences between pre- and post-burnout measures (across areas of EE, DP, and PA) were not as extreme as the change in scores on the pre- and post-STR measure. This observation of the group data is consistent with the majority of individuals increasing their total scores on the STR survey over the course of the intervention.

The emotional exhaustion (EE) area of burnout reported the biggest change between pre- and post-intervention burnout means. This difference in group means denotes a decrease in feelings of emotional exhaustion reported by participants. Additionally, the personal accomplishment (PA) area of burnout was evaluated as increasing about 1-point across the time of this study. The depersonalization (DP) area of burnout was evaluated as having minimal change across the two time points.

The group means and standard deviations across the pre- and post-STR measure resulted in a 5-point increase of reported knowledge and practice of student-teacher relationship behaviors in the classroom. It is important to acknowledge that the mean STR score for the eight participants on this measure was 61.25 (SD=5.19) to begin this intervention program. With 79 possible points on this measure, the participating teachers demonstrated strong knowledge and current practice of 77 percent of the student-teacher relationship behaviors asked about on this survey. This proposes an initially strong baseline knowledge and understanding of these STR practices from the participants prior to beginning the intervention sessions.

The areas assessed in this study have been discussed individually across the eight participants and two time periods. It is also possible to observe some relationships between these areas previously mentioned. Three of the eight participants, who reported lower EE scores, also reported higher STR scores, with an average of 9.6-points higher on their STR post-intervention survey. The five participants that improved their PA scores also reported, on average, a 7-point increase in their STR scores across the study. Finally, two of the eight participants who reported both a decrease in their EE scores and an increase in their PA scores, also reported an increase (9-points and 12-points) in their STR scores at the end of the study. While a small sample size limits the comprehensive understanding these intervention sessions had on participating teachers' burnout and STR practices, the results demonstrate some impact and relationship between these factors.

Participants' pre- and post-intervention surveys remained confidential and could not be used to identify a specific participant's responses. However, based on sign-in sheets used at each session in order to appropriately award continuing education credits

(CEC) to each participant, all eligible 2nd-grade to 5th-grade teachers in this study attended at least two of the three intervention sessions.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study's intervention demonstrated small changes on participants' burnout scores across the areas of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP) and personal accomplishment (PA). Based on group means and standard deviations, a positive impact was seen in the area of emotional exhaustion, with fewer reported feelings of this type of burnout from participants' work. The personal accomplishment area observed a positive 1-point change and the depersonalization group mean across pre- and post-intervention measures remained relatively stagnant.

This burnout data was surprising based on the perceived enjoyment and greater engagement from participants towards the wellness and self-care activities in the intervention sessions. Based on positive comments made during the sessions and verbal and written feedback participants offered following the three meetings, the researcher expected a bigger change across the burnout areas. In this case, the MBI-ES did not reflect the same results as was informally discussed among the participants. This discrepancy may suggest a need for a more sensitive burnout inventory to assess this component. It may also lead the researcher to believe that while the wellness activities were perceived as more intriguing to participants, they did not practice these skills outside the intervention sessions and therefore, these activities did not have a strong and direct impact on the participating teachers' feelings of burnout or their stress management skills.

The change of participants' scores on the pre- and post-intervention student-teacher relationship (STR) measure represented larger growth of knowledge and practice

of STR behaviors in the classroom. Overall, the group mean for this survey increased 5-points at the end of the study. The initial measured knowledge and practice of 77 percent of the STR behaviors asked about also represents a strong knowledge base the participants had before participating in this study. This may suggest that those with a greater knowledge and understanding of STR behaviors may be more likely, compared to their co-workers potentially using fewer STR practices in their classroom, to participate in an intervention program like this one.

Overall, the 5-points of growth on the STR measure, as the largest change among this study's data, is not necessarily monumental. However, while these results demonstrated less impact on participants as this researcher hypothesized, the study itself represented a unique, but positive, presence in this school building and its district. According to participants' self-report, this study offered opportunities, resources and conversation with participants different than they had previously experienced in their professional role. Each intervention session had an 85 to 100 percent turnout rate with great enthusiasm from participants. Each of the eight participants attended at least two of the three sessions. This small, but assessable, change on these burnout and STR measures ignites potential for future hands-on intervention programs that join these areas of research in the school setting.

Limitations

As a novel intervention program combining burnout and STR principles, there are evidenced limitations and restrictions that may have played a negative role on the outcome data. The first is the amount of information the researcher was required to fit into each session, as it did not always allow for natural discussion and processing time

that may occur between information. In addition, the period in the school year when this study took place represented a high-stress time of year for teachers. In the last few months of the school year, there was added stress from upcoming position shifts in administration, position uncertainty, high-stakes testing, end-of-year celebrations and simply busy or irregular schedules due to the previously mentioned events.

Participants' post-intervention burnout inventories may have reported higher levels of stress and feelings of burnout during the late spring opposed to another time in the year. However, the personal accomplishment (PA) area assessed on the MBI-ES may have been directly impacted by a teacher's personal evaluation of their school year. If they felt it had gone positively and ended successfully, they may feel more accomplished in their role. If their standardized test scores were lower compared to last year or they did not have students finish the year as planned, they may have felt more unaccomplished and reported lower personal accomplishment scores. Additionally, teachers' scores on the STR survey may have been higher if they had even more time during the year to implement new STR practices in their classrooms and carry out these behaviors for a longer period of time. On the other hand, these teachers may have found more down time towards the end of the year to try or maintain these STR behaviors with their students.

Finally, this study was completed in a relatively small elementary school and therefore, produced a small N. If the intervention study was done again with a larger school, it may yield a bigger sample size and offer more data that would allow formal measurement and analysis of impact on participants.

Suggestions for Future Research

As recommendations and suggestions to future interventionists, it may be useful to complete a needs assessment throughout the school district to identify the “neediest” school for this program. This current sample began this intervention having knowledge and practice of 77 percent of the STR behaviors asked about. Doing a needs assessment may identify a school population that knows less about these practices and/or is projecting higher levels of burnout. Additionally, this researcher would recommend holding *more* intervention sessions over a longer period during the school year. This allows less material to be included in each session and makes these meetings a part of the participants’ work environment. Adding a “homework” component to the sessions may also encourage the participating teachers to practice the wellness skills outside or between sessions so they develop new habits and enhance their self-care skills. This may have a greater direct impact on their overall feelings of burnout.

It may also be beneficial to add an observation component to this intervention program, either as a way to assess STR practices in addition or in place of the STR self-report survey. Due to time constraints, an observation of each teacher was not possible in this current study but would be enlightening for future research. Finally, an age-appropriate pre- and post-intervention measure for participants’ students to complete about their teacher’s STR behaviors observed in the classroom may be helpful as an additional measure.

It is also important to consider the skills most needed and appropriate for someone facilitating these sessions for teachers. The facilitator should demonstrate strong active listening skills and an ability to be flexible and adaptive to the group’s preferences and needs. This sample group in particular demonstrated an interest in discussion time

over hands-on didactic activities. Observing this in the first session, the facilitator was better able to adapt the activities in the following sessions to include more discussion when possible. Additionally, making consistent efforts to ensure participants feel comfortable, either by offering light refreshments or kinetic items during the sessions, and reminding the group of confidentiality each meeting, allowed for a safe space and more vibrant conversation and engagement in each topic presented.

Implications for School Psychologists

Unlike many other school personnel, school psychologists are uniquely trained to provide programming for teachers as well as students. With the distinctive training in both psychology and education, comes a knowledge about resiliency, stress management skills, attachment, and systems theory. School psychologists can fulfill a great need in schools by educating and supporting teachers as this study has attempted to do. Taking steps to help a school's teachers can ultimately help many students in turn.

This study built rapport with these participating teachers, which consecutively built stronger relationships for future professional interactions on behalf of students, including consultation, interventions and collaboration in meetings. Additionally, this intervention program raised awareness of the school psychologist role and its function in the school building and school system as a whole. This may be especially beneficial to school psychologists based in schools, as it provided community and partnership with vital adults in a child's school environment.

Additional suggestions for future successful intervention programs are listed below.

- Gain approval and support for program from district and building-level administration.

- Coordinate with district administration to offer continuing education credits (CEC) for each session attended.
- Give pre- and post-surveys in hardcopy format opposed to electronic formats.
- Send short electronic poll to participants asking about their availability for meetings. Find a time that works best for most participants' schedules to set meeting dates and times.
- Establish a "Vegas rule" for each session, making clear that personal anecdotes, struggles, or stories shared in the group remain confidential among the group members.
- Serve light refreshments at the beginning of each meeting.
- Offer relevant freebies to participants at the end of each session (e.g. lavender scented salt bags, mindfulness script, small journals, etc.).
- Send reminder emails a week and a couple days prior to each meeting.
- Give relevant resources in hardcopy opposed to emailing them. Teachers were more likely to read them as they left the sessions and when they got home.
- Encourage teachers to make a personal goal for themselves throughout the sessions, either related to their self-care, a specific student relationship, a teaching practice, etc., to increase focus during each meeting.

This intervention program allowed this researcher to apply student-teacher relationship behaviors and stress management principals within a school environment, which ultimately gained better understanding about the student population, the faculty community and the school and district as a whole. This can be seen as a stepping-stone to more intervention programs in the school setting based around these areas of research in a conjoint manner.

Elementary-aged students in low-income areas face poverty, homelessness, food deprivation, increased transition and instability, in addition to their daily schoolwork. These students bring these hardships to the classroom and their teachers are looking for ways to support them during school hours. If this research can begin to offer teachers practical and efficient methods to help their students, it might be the power of one moment or one relationship that positively influences a student and his teacher.

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Appendix A

Sample Items from Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES)

1. I feel emotionally drained from my work. (**Emotional Exhaustion**)
2. I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.

(**Personal Accomplishment**)
3. I don't really care what happens to some students. (**Depersonalization**)

Appendix B

General Classroom Teacher Survey

*Please complete this survey honestly and to the best of your ability. **Do not include your name on this form.** This information will only be seen by the researcher of this study. For the answers below, please rate your response based on a scale from 1 to 4.*

1(never) **2**(I try to) **3**(occasionally) **4**(every time)

1. I show students I support their achievements and successes in school

1 2 3 4
2. I ask about students' personal successes they achieve outside of school

1 2 3 4
3. I show active listening skills to my students every time we interact

1 2 3 4
4. I regularly ask my students what topics they're excited and eager to learn about

1 2 3 4
5. I actively listen to my students, even when I'm stressed out and overwhelmed

1 2 3 4
6. I feel equipped to talk with students about their families or concerns about home

Yes No Sometimes
7. I feel equipped to talk with students about their friendships with peers

Yes No Sometimes
8. I know how to appropriately share my own experiences with students

Yes No Sometimes

Please answer the questions below with either Yes or No. If you are unsure if a current classroom practice would fulfill the question, mark IDK for "I don't know."

-
9. I have a formal and regular time for students to check-in with me as a group about topics of their choosing.

Y N IDK
 10. I have a formal and regular time for students to check-in with me individually about topics of their choosing.

Y N IDK

11. I have an accountability system in my classroom that encourages students to hold each other accountable.

Y N IDK

12. I have a formal system that allows students to affirm and support one another as classmates and friends.

Y N IDK

13. I am knowledgeable about the family status and current stressors (if any) of all my students.

Y N IDK

14. The values I emphasize in my classroom and to my students are

Please answer these following questions using the key below.

1(never) 2(I have tried this) 3(occasionally) 4(every time)

15. I actively involve my students in the creation of classroom expectations and rules.

1 2 3 4

16. I have created a space in the classroom that encourages students to take academic risks.

1 2 3 4

17. I have taken specific steps to communicate my high expectations for students.

1 2 3 4

○ Example(s): _____

18. I give regular constructive feedback to students.

1 2 3 4

○ Example(s) of when: _____

19. I have designated a specific time or part of the day to answer questions my students may have.

1 2 3 4

20. I arrange students' desks based on _____.

Please answer these following questions using the key below.

1(never) **2**(occasionally) **3**(all the time) **4**(IDK how to do this)

21. I teach my students specific relaxation techniques they can use when they get frustrated.

1 2 3 4

22. I use specific relaxation techniques to deal with my job-related or personal stress.

1 2 3 4

Example(s): _____

23. I have formally discussed conflict management with my students.

1 2 3 4

24. I use real life personal examples to demonstrate my point.

1 2 3 4

25. I have a daily ritual to “reboot” me at the start of the day or when I feel especially overwhelmed.

1 2 3 4

26. I consider my strengths as a teacher to be _____

27. I want to grow professionally in the area(s) of _____

*Responses on this survey are confidential and will remain only with the researcher. Specific teacher responses will **not** be shared with building or county administration, parents, or other faculty members. Please answer honestly and to the best of your ability for the purposes of this research.*

Appendix C

Intervention Session Activities Outline

Session 1: Changing the View, Not You*Begin with highs and lows*

- a. *Establish expectations, create ground rules*
- b. Self-talk
 - i. Examine cognitive behavioral technique
- c. Daily ritual
 - i. For both yourself and your class
- d. Perspective sharing/alternating
 - i. Examining from a different angle
 1. Box flip / optical illusion
 - ii. Bringing a new perspective into the classroom
- e. Active listening
 - i. How well do you think you do this already? Why is this important?
 - ii. Didactic scenario activity
 - iii. How do we actively listen during active times?
- f. Rapport building
 - i. What does this look like in a classroom?
 1. Operationally define this behavior in schools
 - a. Encourage examples with daily 5, PBIS, knowledge of home/community or similarities
 2. Formal definition: *state of harmonious understanding with another individual or group that enables greater and easier communication.*
 - ii. Easy ways to incorporate this into your set routine

2. Creating a Community*Begin with highs and lows*

- a. Coping strategies – choose and discuss
- b. Conveying high expectations
 - i. Differential learning and goals
 1. Discuss what this means? How do we do this in the classroom?
- c. Constructive feedback
 - i. What is an area of growth you can comment on? Praise the progress!
 - ii. Find a new way to say it
 1. Personalize it! Think of a student you have recently given feedback to. How would you modify this interaction now?
- d. Peer relations
 - i. Reminder of daily team rituals
 - ii. Incorporating this into a lesson, a day, a week

3. Caring for the Community

Begin with highs and lows

- a. Mindfulness script
- b. 30 self-minutes a day
 - i. Oxygen mask example
 1. Taking care of yourself to take care of your students
 2. What do these 30 minutes look like? What can they look like?
- c. Wellness plans
 - i. Self-care strengths, weaknesses, needs, goals
- d. Supporting each other
 - i. Reaching out in support, sharing 30 self-minutes with each other, random acts of kindness, giving gratitude before the grave
- e. Taking risks
 - i. Confidence to share knowledge
 - ii. Confidence to share confusion
- f. **#iwishmyteacherknew**
 - i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiD7nvS3DzY>
 1. What responses do you expect?
 2. Biggest fear of doing this?

Appendix D

Consent Form to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Alexis Morse from James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to promote teacher wellbeing and build a positive and supportive classroom for both teachers and students. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her graduate thesis project.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of surveys that will be administered to individual participants. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to current teaching practices and knowledge and/or practice of wellbeing techniques. Following these surveys, you will be asked to participate in three sessions on these topics.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require no more than 3.5 hours of your time throughout the school year. This includes completing rating scales and participating in three hour-long sessions.

Risks

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include knowledge, training, and resources to help participants promote a more positive classroom environment and better manage high stress levels in their jobs. There is also potential for improved collaboration and support among participating teachers. Participating teachers will also receive continuing education credits for their time and participation in this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented at the researcher's thesis defense. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Researcher's Name: Alexis Morse
 Department: School Psychology
 James Madison University
 morse2ad@dukes.jmu.edu

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 Department: School Psychology
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Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. David Cockley
 Chair, Institutional Review Board
 James Madison University
 (540) 568-2834
cocklede@jmu.edu
Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

 Name of Participant (Printed)

 Name of Participant (Signed)

 Date

 Name of Researcher (Signed)

 Date