

A CASE STUDY EXPLORING STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS  
TWO YEARS IN THE AFTERMATH OF A SCHOOL SHOOTING  
IN A RURAL SOUTH-CENTRAL UNITED STATES SCHOOL

by

Lee J. Guidry, Jr.

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Gail Collins, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Rebecca Dilling, Ed.D., Committee Member

### Abstract

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Children should feel safe within the walls of their school campuses. The central research question follows: How do teachers describe their experiences regarding student-teacher relationships two years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school? The theory guiding the research was Bowlby's attachment theory. The study's focus was student-teacher relationships, and Bowlby's theory on attachment was pertinent to understanding the effects a school shooting has on student-teacher relationships. Participants included the teachers who experienced this phenomenon at the study site and dealt with its aftermath in their classrooms. Data were collected through personal interviews, a focus group, and classroom observations. The data were analyzed based on Yin's (2018) theoretical propositions and time-series analysis. Three recurring themes developed during the data analysis. These themes were interrelated, connected, and protector. The themes were consistent with current literature regarding attachment and social interaction. The findings suggested that a school shooting event will have a slight negative impact on healthy student-teacher relationships.

*Keywords:* attachment theory, school shooting, school violence, student-teacher relationships

## **Dedication**

With great pride, I dedicate this manuscript to my wife, Angie, who is a constant source of blessing and encouragement in my life.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to my children Maddie and Nathan for their sacrifices so I could further my education.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Independent School District (ISD)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

United States Secret Service (USSS)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

School shootings are a passion-driven topic that prompts discussions across multiple academic circles (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Beland & Kim, 2016). No academic stakeholder wants to experience this phenomenon on their campus (Fiedler et al., 2020). Since the April 20, 1999, Columbine school shooting incident, many school districts have developed and implemented punitive, no-tolerance policies to prevent this phenomenon from reoccurring (Addington & Muschert, 2019). Punitive, no-tolerance approaches by districts have failed, however, to decrease the occurrences of violence on campuses (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Colombi et al., 2016; Gagnon et al., 2017). In school districts that focus on prevention, recovery is often overlooked, including how teachers address violence in the classroom (Espelage et al., 2015; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015).

Chapter 1 provides an introduction for this research to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Chapter 1 further details the background of school shootings with an in-depth look at the phenomenon's historical, social, and theoretical significance. Following the background section, I detail my situation to self to present the study's personal significance. Information is provided on the study's purpose to include why the topic of a school shooting and student-teacher relationships was chosen. The significance section of Chapter 1 details the empirical, theoretical, and practical aspects of student-teacher relationships. Research questions are discussed with the purpose of each of the questions. Chapter 1 concludes with definition and summary sections.

### **Background**

The background section encompasses the historical, social, and theoretical backgrounds

of school shootings. The historical section overviews the history of extreme school violence in the United States of America. The social section covers how the problem has affected society. The theoretical section presents theories that researchers have used to examine the problem.

### **Historical Context**

The first recorded incidence of school violence in North America happened on July 26, 1764, when four Native Americans entered a schoolhouse and killed nine students and their teacher (Dixon, 2005; Gasparro, 2007). One of the earliest acts of mass school violence in the United States occurred in 1927 when a disgruntled school board member planted bombs around a campus in Bath, Michigan (Finley, 2014). The incident killed 45 and injured 58. It was the deadliest school attack in U.S. History. The next major event did not occur until 1979 when a student killed two and injured nine at a Cleveland elementary school (Leven & Madfist, 2018). During the 1980s, there were several more incidences of school shootings and several in the 1990s, with Columbine being the most notorious of that decade (Finley, 2014).

The 1999 Columbine school shooting caused academic stakeholders to rethink policies in order to prevent this phenomenon from recurring (Addington & Muschert, 2019). Since Columbine, academic stakeholders have taken a more proactive approach to prevent a school shooting (Addington & Muschert, 2019). The difficulty in prevention is that schools tend to look for characteristics that can identify a potential shooter (Livingston et al., 2019), but the motives, characteristics, and outcomes differ in each occurrence (Cornell, 2014; King et al., 2019; Livingston et al., 2019).

Studies on the effects of school violence on students showed that most students are resilient and recover emotionally within 6 months of the occurrence (Beland & Kim, 2016; Benbenishty et al., 2016). After recovery, many students can learn but do not feel safe on campus

(Abulof, 2017; Beland & Kim, 2016; Benbenishty et al., 2016). Teachers can benefit from these findings to determine the most appropriate way to make their classrooms feel safe and welcoming. Having a safe and welcoming environment will allow the students to feel secure, and learning may occur (Abulof, 2017; Cornell, 2014; Dewey, 1938).

### **Social Context**

Although school shootings are uncommon, the media often emotionalizes them, and people perceive that schools are not a safe place for children (Beland & Kim, 2016; Green et al., 2018; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Landrum et al., 2019). School boards addressed the perceived new epidemic in American schools by developing stricter, zero-tolerance policies toward school-related violence (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Curran et al., 2020; King et al., 2019). The entire school culture went through a transformation resulting in the appearance of a safe learning environment (Armstrong, 2019). Research showed that these transformations had little to no positive effect on the schools' climate (Armstrong, 2019; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020). The schools resembled fortresses instead of institutions of learning (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020). Students did not see their schools as safe learning environments (Armstrong, 2019). The new transformations had several adverse effects on students and their perceptions of campus safety.

One consequence of these transformations was homicidal talk among students. Such talk is common among adolescents (Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015). Adolescents use homicidal talk as a dark hyperbole to create a release from reality (Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015). Teenagers struggle with self-identity (Espelage et al., 2015; Garner et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl, 2019), and current pedagogy practices have been successful in addressing a student's identity as a learner but have failed to address a student's identity as a person (Espelage et al., 2015; Hawkes & Twemlow,

2015; Weisbrot, 2008).

Another consequence of school violence is the online subculture of school shooting fans (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Oksanen, Hawdon, et al., 2014; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). A school shooting fan is a person who is infatuated with the school shooting phenomenon (Oksanen, Hawdon, et al., 2014). Tumblr, DeviantArt, and YouTube became social media outlets where fans of school shootings had a place to connect with likeminded people (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Oksanen, Hawdon, et al., 2014). The main categories of school shooting fan groups were researchers, fangirls, copycats, and Columbiners (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). The people referred to as researchers in these groups were fans who wanted to understand the details of school shooting occurrences. At the same time, the Columbiners' interests were explicitly related to the 1999 Columbine shooting (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). Fangirls fantasized about sexual encounters with school shooters, and copycats sought to reenact specific school shootings (Oksanen, Hawdon, et al., 2014; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). The copycats were considered the most dangerous of these groups since they create specific plans to reenact school shootings (Oksanen, Hawdon, et al., 2014; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018).

Victims of school shootings tended to create solidarity among people who experienced the phenomenon (Numi et al., 2012; Orcutt et al., 2014). Victims were bound by an experience with which few of their peers could empathize (Numi et al., 2012). The research by Numi et al. (2012) showed that this type of solidarity negatively affected the community. Victims categorized people as *us* (those who experienced an act of violence) and *them* (people who do not understand the experience) (Numi et al., 2012). While the bonds formed from a school shooting may assist in recovery, the victims in previous studies seem to exclude people from their social circles who have not experienced the phenomenon in their personal lives (Numi et



al., 2012; Orcutt et al., 2014).

### **Theoretical Context**

There were three primary theories that researchers used to examine the problem of school shootings. The first was Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Holmes, 2014). Attachment theory was based on the notion that a person is emotionally attached to a primary caregiver, and the person's attachment affects their behavior and emotional development (Bowlby, 1982; Diamond 2014). The four attachment theory components are a safe haven, a secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress (Bolby, 1982). The first attachment is the intrauterine bond a child develops with their mother in the womb and serves as a foundation for future emotional relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Lee, 2017). John Bowlby (1982) stated, "What cannot be communicated to the mother cannot be communicated to self" (p. 154). Secure attachments foster healthy behavioral and emotional growth in adolescents (Bowlby, 1982; Diamond, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2017).

The second theory researchers used was Dewey's experience and education theory (Dewey, 1938). Dewey (1938) theorized that students learn in the context of past experiences, environment, and level of engagement. School violence is a reality in schools, and students bring that experience into the classroom (Diliberti et al., 2019; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015; Johnson et al., 2012). Dewey (1938) theorized that the needs of the student must be incorporated into instruction. Dewey believed that students' past experiences affected their learning, and the students' needs must be a priority in the classroom. Because of this, Dewey's education theory is appropriate for this study. While Dewey's theory requires the immediate reality of the student to be contained in the classroom, it fails to address the importance of the bonds formed between the teacher and student (Diliberti et al., 2019; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015; Johnson et al., 2012).

The third theory researchers used to understand school shootings is Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory. Maslow developed an order of needs each person progressively works through. The needs are physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization, and each need has to be satisfied until an individual can move on to the next level (Abulof, 2017; Crandall et al., 2019; Maslow 1943). Many researchers used Maslow (1943) to understand individuals' motivation (Abulof, 2017; Crandall et al., 2019). His theory is used across many different fields of study (Abulof, 2017; Crandall et al., 2019; Maslow, 1943). While Maslow's hierarchical needs address the need for people to feel safe to perform, it does not consider specific bonds created between parents and children that translate into other relationships the child develops (Abulof, 2017; Crandall et al., 2019; Maslow, 1943).

The theory most appropriate for this case study is Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. The four components of attachment theory reflect the development of student-teacher relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Kim, Kim, & Cho, 2017). The teacher acts as the secure base for the students and creates a safe haven where the students will experience lower occurrences of anxiety in the classroom. Students find comfort and feel safe knowing that they trust a teacher within their functioning proximity (Dowd et al., 2013; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos. 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017).

### **Situation to Self**

There is an existential motivation that draws me to this study. I experienced a school shooting firsthand and want to give voice to teachers who share this experience and continue to teach students daily. I knew the student who was the school shooter and had him in my class. I remember the exact desk where he sat and his classroom behavior. Unfortunately, I still remember standing face-to-face with him as he stood over the wounded student while holding

the gun. I cannot unsee that moment, and it will forever haunt me.

The philosophical questions I have for the study are, "Why did I go through this?" (ontological) and "What value does the experience provide in research?" (axiological). Both assumptions give a sense of being and worth. The single instrumental case study approach was chosen since school shootings are observable events with little explanation for students' recovery. My doctoral focus is on curriculum instruction, which gives credence to understanding student-relationship changes, if any, that teachers have experienced after school shootings. The current study gives them that voice.

People generally consider themselves safe because they are existing sentient beings (Browning & Joenniemi, 2016). The fact that people perceive their immediate environment is a causation of awareness of their surroundings. The ontological premise of being within a school building's confines allows the person to feel safe in an environment not known for chronic violence (Schubert & Giles, 2019). When violence occurs, it disrupts the perception of safety and causes the person to question why this happened to them (Browning & Joenniemi, 2016). The ontological questions of why are rethought and questioned after the assumptions are made false by an incident of violence (Browning & Joenniemi, 2016).

"What value does the experience provide in research?" is a question that I have pondered frequently. It is not enough to study it without adding new information to the field to allow for further research. The question's value is that it will provide data for stakeholders in determining how to address the issue and how to emphasize its importance (Serafimovich & Belyaeva, 2019). An axiological question must prove the worth of what is assumed (Lazar & Lee-Stronach, 2019; Serafimovich & Belyaeva, 2019). The study will satisfy the axiological assumption of value by demonstrating the importance of student-teacher relationships in the classroom for student

development. The paradigm that guided this study was a pragmatic approach. The occurrence happened in a specific setting within a specific time within a teacher's specific social setting. No two school shootings are the same due to the personal nature of each one. There is no general formula that predicts, prevents, or assists in the recovery of students and teachers. Therefore, the student-teacher relationships must be studied, as well as how those relationships assist in recovery after a school shooting.

From a personal standpoint, there was much personal reflection after the incident, which affected how I developed lessons and instruction. Part of a teacher's job is to plan lessons and deliver high-quality instruction (Gush & Greeff, 2018; Swanson, 2016). Being that humans are social beings, this type of incident should influence future planning that includes time for social bonding (Clarà, 2017). Knowing this means that the teachers who have experienced a school shooting should have a future planning perspective that benefits the student as an individual and as a learner..

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that this study seeks to explore is understanding the importance of student-teacher relationships after a school shooting. Parents trust teachers to keep their children safe throughout the school day. Unfortunately, on multiple occasions, a student has walked onto a school campus with a firearm intending to harm teachers, staff, or other students. A school shooting can occur on any campus in the United States. Students who experience this phenomenon may suffer emotional trauma and struggle to maintain relationships with their teachers, whom they see as their protectors (Castedo et al., 2018).

Numerous researchers have studied school shootings and their effects on students (Astor et al., 2009; Castedo et al., 2018; Daniels et al., 2007). The school shooting phenomenon

transcends culture, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and geography (Castedo et al., 2018; Costantino et al., 2019; Daniels et al., 2007; Diliberti et al., 2019). Research showed that school climate and student performance are related (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015). The fewer occurrences of violence on campus, the better the student performance (Beland & Kim, 2016; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015; Šebestová, 2018). There is a synthesis among researchers that if students perceived that the school is a safe and welcoming place, the students would perform at a higher standard (Beland & Kim, 2016; Castedo et al., 2018).

Despite all the knowledge obtained, researchers point out that much is unknown regarding school shootings (Deole, 2018; Diliberti et al., 2019). The primary concept researchers cannot agree on is determining, for prediction and prevention, the characteristics of a person who will inflict harm on another student with a firearm (Cornell, 2014; Costantino et al., 2019; Gerard et al., 2016; Girard & Aguilar, 2019; Gordon et al., 2018; Livingston et al., 2019). Several researchers concluded that too many variables existed between individuals to predict and prevent students from harming their peers (Burke et al., 2014; Cadely et al., 2019; Castedo et al., 2018; Kruger et al., 2018). Simply put, there is not enough commonality between students who commit acts of violence on school campuses to create reliable predictors (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Costantino et al., 2019; Diliberti et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2015). Each student is unique, and it is challenging to create generalizations among adolescents who have acted violently toward their peers (Espelage et al., 2015; Gerard et al., 2016; Livingston et al., 2019; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017).

The general student perception was that schools are a safe place to interact with (Abulof, 2017; Li et al., 2019). Unfortunately, school shootings occur worldwide (Cornell, 2014; Hawkes

& Twemlow, 2015; Watson, 2007). Contemporary researchers have recommended further research in three critical areas of the school shooting phenomenon: Zero-Tolerance, Social-Emotional Learning, and Prevention in the context of relationship building between teachers and their students (Alnaim, 2018; Berlowitz et al., 2017; Chen & Astor, 2011; Crosnoe et al., 2016; Espelage et al., 2015; Garner et al., 2018). Zero-Tolerance focuses on punitive prevention while Social Emotional Learning and relationship building between teachers and students focus on prevention through mutual respect among everyone in the classroom (Alnaim, 2018; Berlowitz et al., 2017; Chen & Astor, 2011; Crosnoe et al., 2016; Espelage et al., 2015; Garner et al., 2018). Based on current findings, there is a need to further research student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting. A clear understanding of how teachers address the school shooting phenomenon in the classroom may help stakeholders develop policies regarding prevention and recovery based on classroom teachers' perspectives and recommendations.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study is to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The participants will be certified public school teachers present at the study site on the day of the school shooting. At this stage in the research, a student-teacher relationship is defined as peer-mentor interactions between a student and a teacher based on the closeness they feel toward each other (Avery et al., 2018; Chung et al., 2019; Martin & Collie, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2016; Shipley et al., 2018). Specifically, this study will examine the factors and experiences that influenced teachers' perceptions of the effects a school shooting had on their relationships with students. This research's guiding theory is Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Holmes, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study's significance is that it furthers the research on the effects of school violence on student-teacher relationships. Academic stakeholders can use the research data, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for possible changes to curriculum development and discipline policies. A significant gap exists in understanding how teachers address school violence's effects on students at rural south-central United States schools. The study seeks to understand the common themes of how various perceptions have developed among teachers regarding school shootings.

### **Empirical**

Research has shown that school violence is common on campuses globally (Cornell, 2014; Oksanen, Kaltiala-Heino, et al., 2014; Watson, 2007). In the Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools report (2019), 66% of students experienced a physical attack on campus during the 2017-2018 school year (Diliberti et al., 2019). Current research shows that acts of violence on school campuses occur daily (Beland & Kim, 2016; Castedo et al., 2018; Duerr, 2019). Some of the current studies include verbal harassment as an act of violence (Beland & Kim, 2016; Cornell, 2014; Oksanen, Kaltiala-Heino, et al., 2014; Watson, 2007). Including verbal harassment as violence increases the percentage of experience significantly among adolescents (Beland & Kim, 2016; Castedo et al., 2018; Duerr, 2019).

## **Theoretical**

The significance of using Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory for this single instrumental case study is based on the notion that a person is emotionally attached to a primary caregiver (Bowlby 1982; Kim, Kim, & Cho, 2017). That attachment serves as an emotional security base that affects the person's future relationships and the perceived security those relationships provide (Bowlby, 1969; Diamond, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Kim, Kim, & Cho, 2017). Bowlby (1982) argued that certain common instinctive behaviors exist in humans, such as mating, caring for the young, and a child's emotional attachment to their parents. Instinctive behavior transcends religion, culture, gender, socioeconomics, and geographical location (Bowlby 1982).

Using Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory can add to the literature on school shootings' problem. Bowlby's (1982) theory of attachments demonstrated that a strong relationship between a child and a caregiver allows the child to function with a reasonable sense of security. The child views that relationship as a secure base around which to feel safe during periods of increased anxiety (Bowlby, 1969; Diamond, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Kim, Kim, & Cho, 2017). After a school shooting, the immediate need is for the emotional trauma to be addressed. The classroom teacher has a vital role in that scenario (Chen & Astor, 2011; Cunningham, 2019; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015).

## **Practical**

This proposed study is general enough that it transcends socioeconomic, geographical, and cultural limitations. Social development is part of a child's learning, and nurturing it post-crisis helps stakeholders at other campuses adopt policies for recovery and prevention (Curran, 2019; Dinallo, 2016). Also, the implementation of recommendations of this study will benefit the community surrounding the campus. It is the village helping to raise the children.



This study is essential to the local community because there has been little disclosure to the proactive, positive steps teachers have taken to rebuild trust between the students and the campus (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Crosnoe et al., 2016). The other campuses that experienced a school shooting enacted a series of punitive, zero-tolerance policies to prevent a reoccurrence on their campuses (Alnaim, 2018; Berlowitz et al., 2017; Curran, 2019). The new policies are at the forefront of every speech or announcement that deals with discipline. The focus of zero-tolerance policies is on punishment, not prevention (Alnaim, 2018; Berlowitz et al., 2017; Curran, 2019). It is hoped that this study will influence open and honest communication between the community and the school to better understand each teacher's steps to rebuild trust between themselves and their students.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions must align with the methodology, theory, literature, and gaps within the problem studied (Alavi et al., 2018). The study's questions were based on understanding student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The central question aligns with the research problem and the purpose of the research. The sub-questions support the central question in the research. The central research question is as follows:

How do teachers describe their experiences regarding student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural South Central United States school?

The study explores the dynamic relationship between teachers and students in the classroom after a school shooting. Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory is the theory guiding the study, so the questions in the study reflect this theory. Answering the central question will help

stakeholders understand the influence healthy student-teacher relationships have on student growth in the aftermath of a school shooting (Chung et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019).

The sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do teachers describe the process of building student-teacher relationships in their classrooms?

Teachers who build healthy relationships create a family-like atmosphere and a sense of belonging for their students (Anness et al., 2019a; Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Chung et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019; Turley & Graham, 2019). Student-teacher relationships should be a priority on school campuses (Nguyen et al., 2016; Pekel et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). Sub-question 1 will provide insight into the process teachers use to build relationships with their students.

2. How do teachers describe the effects a school shooting had on their student-teacher relationships?

Students that experience a school shooting suffer emotional trauma (Crosnoe et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2016; Oksanen et al., 2014; Turunen et al., 2014). Students' emotional trauma causes distrust between the students and the school where the phenomenon was experienced (Lei et al., 2016; Oksanen et al., 2014; Turunen et al., 2014). Sub-question 2 will provide insight into the effects a school shooting has on student-teacher relationships.

3. How do teachers sustain student-teacher relationships after a school shooting?

If student-teacher relationships are a priority on campus, then teachers must strive to rebuild trust with a student after the student has suffered emotional trauma from a school shooting (Crosnoe et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2016; Oksanen et al., 2014; Turunen et al., 2014). Teachers must reestablish the family-like atmosphere and sense of belonging for students

(Ancess et al., 2019a; Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Chung et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019; Turley & Graham, 2019). Sub-question 3 will give insight into how teachers reestablish their relationships with students who have suffered emotional trauma from a school shooting.

### **Definitions**

1. *Curriculum* – Curriculum is a set of learning standards for classroom instruction (Šebestová, 2018).
2. *School Shooting* – A school shooting is an act of violence on the campus of an academic institution where a firearm was discharged by the assailant (Beland & Kim, 2016).
3. *Social-Emotional Learning* – Social-Emotional Learning is a holistic approach to learning that allows a student to discover self (Espelage et al., 2015).
4. *Student-Teacher Relationships* - A student-teacher relationship is defined as peer-mentor interactions between a student and a teacher based on the closeness they feel toward each other (Avery et al., 2018).
5. *Zero Tolerance* – Zero tolerance policies are punitive discipline policies enacted to deter future violent acts in schools (Berlowitz et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

Studies of school violence have increased since the Columbine tragedy. Many researchers focused on prevention-measure policies and resilience in recovery (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Beland & Kim, 2016; Fiedler et al., 2020). The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The chapter focused on the historical, social, and theoretical backgrounds of the problem of school violence. The chapter described the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance of the problem.

Students develop academically and socially in the classroom (Marginson & Dang, 2017; Schonert-Reichl, 2019). When students feel safe, they are open to instruction (Abulof, 2017). School violence is a passion-driven topic that prompts discussions across multiple academic circles (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Beland & Kim, 2016). No academic stakeholder wants to experience this occurrence of violence on their campus (Fiedler et al., 2020). Current pedagogy practices have been successful in addressing a student's identity as a learner but have failed to address a student's identity as a person (Espelage et al., 2015; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015; Weisbrot, 2008). It is hoped that this study will show that students are emotional beings with social and emotional needs that must be met by their classroom teacher for learning to occur.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Chapter 2 shows that the violence phenomenon has always been present (Blair et al., 2017; Keenan, 2019; Schiering, 2020). A person who lacks the skill set to externalize their experiences symbolically and ideologically runs the risk of externalizing their experiences physically on others (Exner-Cortens et al., 2020; Shipley et al., 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Zabel et al., 2020). School shootings are a type of violent phenomenon that transcends geography, culture, religion, and socioeconomic status (Beland & Kim, 2016; Cornell, 2014; Department of Justice, 2002; Scheper-Hughes, 2018). Violence specific to schools in research is less than 2 decades old, and school violence did not appear in an article title in a research journal until 2002 (Benbenishty & Astor, 2009; Denmark et al., 2006; Moore et al., 2002).

The purpose of this literature review is to expand the knowledge of the impact of student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Chapter 2 will also address this study's problem on the lack of student-teacher relationship building in the aftermath of a school shooting (Shipley et al., 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Zabel et al., 2020). The literature has argued that students who have healthy peer relationships are more apt to have high academic competency and to avoid negative behavior such as violence, truancy, and substance abuse (Chen & Astor, 2011; Holt & Fifer, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016). The literature also stated that the key to healthy peer-to-peer relationships is healthy student-teacher relationships (Martin & Collie, 2019; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). The teacher serves as a positive influence on the student and gives them respect, trust, and honesty, and offers guidance while allowing the student to maintain their individuality (Pekel et al., 2018; Rahmati et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019). Schools that allow

student-teacher relationships to develop see fewer occurrences of violence on their campus (Pekel et al., 2018; Rahmati et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019).

Research indicates that relational-style learning has had more success than punitive zero-tolerance policies (Shiple et al., 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Zabel et al., 2020). Relational learning is built on trust inside the classroom between the teacher and the students. Relational learning is a holistic approach that treats students as people, not just learners (Anness et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). The relational approach differs from zero-tolerance. Zero tolerance is a punitive approach to learning, with harsh punishment used as a school violence deterrent (Shiple et al., 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Zabel et al., 2020). School districts in the United States tend to adopt zero-tolerance policies as an attempt to stifle violence on school campuses (Anness et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). While the concept of zero tolerance policies appears to be the best approach to making schools safe, the literature argued that zero-tolerance has adverse effects on students regarding building trust with their teachers and peers (Anness et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this qualitative case study is Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. Attachment theory is based on the notion that a person is emotionally attached to a primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1967; Bennett & Saks, 2006; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby & King, 2004; Campa et al., 2009; Fear, 2017). That attachment serves as an emotional security base that affects the person's future relationships and the perceived security those relationships provide (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 1988; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015). Bowlby (1982) argued that certain common instinctive behaviors exist in humans, such as mating, caring for the young, and a child's emotional attachment to their parents. Instinctive

behavior transcends religion, culture, gender, socioeconomics, and geographical location (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 1988; Diamond, 2014; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015). Bowlby (1982) theorized that outside the commonalities of instinctive behavior, individuals did not behave stereotypically but within an idiosyncratic performance that is based on their perception of the home environment in which they operate. The attachment theory's four components are a safe haven, secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 1988; Diamond, 2014; Kim & Cho, 2017).

### **Safe Haven**

A safe haven is an attachment area where a person comfortably explores their surroundings and regulates their emotions (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982). In their research, Ainsworth (1967) and Bowlby (1982) described a safe haven as not just the absence of anxiety. A safe haven contains a degree of happiness, self-control, and social interaction that manifests through the individual (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015). Safe haven is a critical component in an adolescent's attachments (Bowlby, 1982; Mota & Matos, 2015). The safe haven allows a person a sense of comfort in high-stress times (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015).

The literature indicated that the child's perception of safe haven was activated when they were put into sudden stressful situations (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973; Bowlby, 1982; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Reisz et al., 2018; Vandesande et al., 2019). The child looks for their secure base to help regulate emotions during the time of elevated stress (Bowlby, 1982; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020; Vandesande et al., 2019). Safe haven is one of two primary purposes of an attachment caregiver (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973). The literature showed that parents naturally see themselves as a safe haven for their children

(Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973; Bowlby, 1982; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Reisz et al., 2018; Vandesande et al., 2019). A parent with a healthy attachment to their child will recognize that their child prefers them over others (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973).

Ainsworth (1967) and Bowlby (1982) found in their research that when an attachment is not predictable as providing a safe haven, the child associated with that attachment will go through confusion and doubt the attachment's ability to provide a safe haven. Bowlby (1982) referred to this as safe haven disorganization. The child becomes unsure if it is safe to explore in their safe haven (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973). Various authors have agreed that if a child is comforted and reassured to continue to explore their surroundings, they have a healthy, safe haven (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973; Bowlby, 1982; Grossmann & Grossmann, 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Reisz et al., 2018; Vandesande et al., 2019). The child can effectively communicate their needs to their attachment (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1973).

The first safe haven experience for a person is in their mother's womb (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017). During adolescence, a person develops subordinate attachments that create new safe havens (Bowlby, 1982). Subordinate attachments may consist of institutions such as a school, a classroom, or a teacher (Bowlby, 1982; Mota & Matos, 2015). Teachers tend to be close to students, and their classrooms become a safe haven for their students (Bowlby, 1982; Mota & Matos, 2015). The essence of the relationships between students and their teachers creates a stronger bond due to familiarity with the teacher and the student's requests for problem-solving (Moto & Matos, 2015). Students who feel safe in the classroom are less anxious and more apt to learn (Bowlby, 1982; Diamond, 2014; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos, 2015).



## Secure Base

Ainsworth (1967) is credited with developing the term *secure base behavior*. The term was based on Ainsworth's observations of mothers and their children in Uganda. Ainsworth noted that infants "do not always stay close to their mothers but rather make little excursions away from her, exploring other objects and interacting with other people, but returning to the mother from time to time" (p. 345). Attachment research suggested that children develop social skills in the presence of their secure base and venture further from it as they grow in confidence that it is safe to increase the distance between them and their secure base (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Bosmans & Kerns, 2015; Koehn & Kerns, 2018; Posada et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2019). While the child is within their secure base, they can successfully interact with their environment and alert their base during times of distress and re-engage with their environment after support is given during the heightened stress (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Koehn & Kerns, 2018; Posada et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2019).

Bowlby (1982) argued that an attachment figure exists within a safe haven that serves as a secure base. When stress is activated within a safe haven, a person will seek their secure base to maintain a physical or emotional closeness for comfort (Bowlby 1982; Dowd et al., 2013; Kearns & Hart, 2017). Students who deem their classroom a safe haven will regard their teacher as the secure base, and the student relies on the teacher for comfort in the time of stress (Bowlby, 1982; Dowd et al., 2013). Teachers acting as secure bases for their students are instrumental in developing their students' discovery of their school identity, which opens their minds to learning (Dowd et al., 2013; Kearns & Hart, 2017). During classroom time, the teacher replaces the parent as the primary nurturer (Bowlby, 1982; Dowd et al., 2013; Kearns & Hart, 2017).

## **Proximity Maintenance**

Proximity maintenance is the desire of a person to be near their secure base (Bowlby, 1982). Ainsworth (1967) noted that proximity behavior is most apparent when a mother leaves the room and her baby cries until her return. The early proximity behavior transitions from crying to attempting to follow the caregiver once the infant learns to crawl (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby's (1982) study on young children's behavior concerning the physical proximity of their parents noted that "clinging to the mother, too, became especially evident after the age of nine months, particularly when a child was alarmed" (p. 201). A child with heightened stress closes the proximity to the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos, 2015). The Ainsworth (1967) and Bowlby (1982) studies discovered that infants begin to show attachments toward other caregivers and exhibit proximity maintenance toward them within the first month of birth. The child develops trust with caregivers based on the security they felt with their mother (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos, 2015). Teachers are potential caregivers to their students (Dowd et al., 2013; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos, 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017). The students practice proximity maintenance to teachers they deem their protectors (Moto & Matos, 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017).

Ainsworth (1967) and Bowlby (1982) noted in their research that children with a strong attachment to their parents could allow a greater distance between them and their parents than children with weak parental attachments. Bowlby argued that the reason the children with stronger attachments wandered farther is that they trusted their parents would still be there when they returned. Students who perceive their teachers as a secure base create mental proximity in the classroom or campus, knowing that their teacher will not leave them (Reeves & La Mare,

2017). The literature indicated that when a teacher with strong student attachments is not present on campus, the students experienced elevated stress levels (Dowd et al., 2013; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos. 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017).

### **Separation Distress**

The final component of Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory is separation distress. Separation distress is the level of anxiety activated in a person when they are beyond their safe haven boundaries (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Dowd et al., 2013; Holmes, 2014; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos. 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017). Students with strong attachments to their teachers will experience higher stress levels when they perceive that they are at a greater distance from their teacher than the attachment can offer security and comfort (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1982; Holmes, 2014). Students experiencing this separation will prioritize getting into proximity to their attachment within their safe haven (Dowd et al., 2013; Kearns & Hart, 2017). Once the student is within the proximity of their safe haven, their stress levels decrease, and they prioritize their learning focus (Dowd et al., 2013; Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos. 2015; Reeves and La Mare, 2017).

### **Related Literature**

Empirical data found in the literature regarding healthy relationships, peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, school shootings, and their effects are described in the following sections. Empirical data found in the literature regarding healthy relationships, peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, school shootings and their effects are described in the following sections. Understanding a school shooting's effects on student-teacher relationships is critical to understanding how teachers develop and maintain student-teacher relationships following this phenomenon's occurrence.

## **Mental Wellness at School**

Mental wellness is critical to a student's academic career (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016; Webber & Mascari, 2018). August et al.'s (2008) research found that approximately 20% of primary and secondary students receive some form of mental health service outside their school campus. Local community health services' treatment and intervention plans typically do not translate to a school setting (August et al., 2008).

Comparably, school programs such as special education and alternative placement services require specific qualifications to receive these services (August et al., 2008; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Demisse and Brener's (2017) study of student mental health estimated that 40% of adolescents manifest levels of anxiety, mood, behavior, and substance disorders. Most adolescents do not receive mental health treatment due to financial issues, limited access, and fear of being ostracized (August et al., 2018; Demisse and Brener, 2017).

There was consensus in the literature that mental health was a non-academic barrier to learning (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Li & Sullivan, 2016; Mostafazadeh et al., 2019). The literature indicated that students' everyday stresses included standardized tests, social awkwardness, and preparing for life after school (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Li & Sullivan, 2016; Mostafazadeh et al., 2019). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, student stress factors have increased due to a lack of social interaction because of lockdowns and virtual learning. (Cortese, 2020). Aiyer et al. (2020) administered a survey on COVID-19 related stress to 111 high school and college students. The study found that 37% of respondents had elevated anxiety levels and 31% had elevated levels of depression due to COVID-19 (Aiyer et al., 2020). Students with increased stress levels without intervention had a disruption in their overall academic performance (Henry et al., 2017; Mostafazadeh et al., 2019).

Mental wellness is critical to a student's academic career (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016; McNeely et al., 2020; Webber & Mascari, 2018). From the existing literature, it is clear that students' everyday stresses are standardized tests, social awkwardness, and preparing for life after school (August et al., 2018; Kutcher et al., 2016; Webber & Mascari, 2018). There was consensus in the literature that mental health problems can be a non-academic barrier to learning (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016; McNeely et al., 2020; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Several programs were developed to address students' mental health needs (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016). Several literature studies showed a multi-tiered approach to mental health in schools (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016). The literature indicated that the U.S. public school system is in critical need of school counselors (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016; McNeely et al., 2020; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Most schools act as students' primary mental healthcare providers (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016). A search of the literature found that school counselors' ratio to students is 1:250 (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016). High school counselors serve multiple roles and cannot act as the primary mental healthcare giver to students (August et al., 2018; Demissie & Brener, 2017; Kutcher et al., 2016).

### **Healthy Relationships**

Relationships are interactions between human beings based on the closeness they feel toward each other (Martin & Collie, 2019; Shipley et al., 2018). Healthy relationships positively affect adolescents' mental health (Exner-Cortens et al., 2020; Guillot-Wright et al., 2018; Shipley et al., 2018; Ttofi et al., 2011). Healthy relationships are not absent of negative influences but contain positive components such as respect, trust, and honesty (Lapshina et al., 2019; Shipley et

al., 2018; Wolfe et al., 2008; Zabel et al., 2020). Healthy relationships are built on encouragement and wanting other people in the relationship to succeed and provide positive support during an occurrence of emotional turmoil (Lapshina et al., 2019; Wolfe et al., 2008; Zabel et al., 2020). Adolescents struggle with identity and use relationships during this growth period to discover self (Brittian, 2012; Holcomb-McCoy, 1997; Kennedy et al., 1999; Lapshina et al., 2019; Zabel et al., 2020). The people adolescents feel close to will influence their behavior, for good or bad, as those adolescents struggle with their self-identity (Martin & Collie, 2019; Shipley et al., 2018; Zabel et al., 2020).

### ***Healthy Peer Relationships***

Shipley et al. (2018) argued that healthy relationships positively impacted adolescents' academic performance and desire to attend school. Healthy relationships are built on encouragement and wanting other people in the relationship to succeed and provide positive support during an occurrence of emotional turmoil (Guillot-Wright et al., 2018). Adolescents struggle with identity and use relationships to discover themselves to determine their place in their environment's social structure (Exner-Cortens et al., 2020). The people adolescents feel close to will influence their behavior, albeit for good or bad, as they struggle with their self-identity (Zabel et al., 2020). Uslu and Gizir (2017) argued that healthy relationships develop naturally between adolescents with minimal facilitation. People mentally thrive on social interactions with friends, peers, and colleagues (Shipley et al., 2018).

### ***High School Student Peer Relationships***

Uslu and Gizir (2017) described a high school peer relationship as a high school student who feels a greater degree of closeness to another student than to others on the same campus. Uslu and Gizir also argued that healthy peer relationships satisfy adolescents' need to belong by

fulfilling their need to connect with others. Students with healthy peer relationships demonstrate more academic and social competence (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018). The literature indicated that students without healthy peer relationships had difficulty adjusting to a school setting (Maunder, 2018). The students with healthy peer relationships had internal and external protective factors that reduced the likelihood of victimization or the psychological effects associated with it (Sigstad, 2018; Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018). Maunder (2018) further argued that students with healthy peer relationships and strong attachments would demonstrate resilience when transferring from high school to post-secondary education.

Sigstad (2018) emphasized the need to promote a healthy psychological environment. A school with a healthy psychological environment creates a desire for students to attend school regularly (Teuscher & Makarova, 2018). The literature indicated that the psychological environment proved to be a predicting factor in school behavior and academic performance (Sigstad, 2018; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018). Schools with healthy psychological environments saw a reduction in bullying (Wang et al., 2016).

### ***Student-Teacher Relationships***

A healthy student-teacher relationship is described throughout the literature as a student feeling closeness to a teacher and experiencing minimal conflict with that teacher (Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari, 2018). Healthy student-teacher relationships are like parent-child relationships in that they reflect an emotional attachment between an adult and an adolescent (Sandwick et al., 2019). Healthy student-teacher relationships are a critical developmental asset for adolescents and are found throughout the literature (Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Pekel et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2020; Yazdi et al., 2019). Yazdi et al. (2019) argued that an experienced teacher has insight into student issues to create a foundation for relationships

with their students. Studies showed that students use healthy student-teacher relationships as a model to build relationships with their peers (Pekel et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019). Healthy student-teacher relationships help the teacher maintain a safe, effective classroom (Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019). A student with positive teacher interactions will develop a caring attitude, develop trust among peers, and offer social support, as stated repeatedly in the literature (Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Pekel et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Yazdi et al., 2019).

### **Conflict Resolution Through Student-Teacher Relationships**

Unresolved conflict negatively impacts organizational culture (Ashley, 2016; Downes, 2018). Students that experience frequent conflict with their teachers are more apt to demonstrate deviant behavior on campus (Ashley, 2016). A literature review showed that student-teacher conflicts are typically left unresolved, due to a passive approach to students' problems (Cook et al., 2016; Downes, 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019). The literature showed that conflict reactions between students and teachers ranged from aggressive to withdrawn (Ciuladiene & Kairiene, 2017). Chung et al. (2019) argued that students with unresolved conflict issues at school are at a higher risk of not completing their secondary education.

The literature indicated that students with positive conflict outcomes focused more on problem-solving and resolving disputes with teachers and peers (Chung et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2016; Cornell, 2014; Sandwick et al., 2019). The student with positive conflict resolution outcomes seldom sees their teachers as autocratic leaders but rather as familiar stakeholders in their education (Ashley, 2016; Ciuladiene & Kairiene, 2017). Students with a positive view of school would more likely complete their secondary education (Ancess et al., 2019). Ashley



(2016) argued that teachers working proactively with challenging students developed authentic relationships with them.

Mutual responsibility is critical in conflict resolution within a student-teacher relationship's confines (Sandwick et al., 2019). The teacher in the student-teacher relationship guides the student through emotional turmoil and gives sound advice based on the teacher's own experiences (Ancess et al., 2019). The literature indicated that when teachers addressed the root cause of emotional conflict a student experienced, the teachers facilitated working through the conflict and prevented an outburst that warranted punitive disciplinary action for the student's behavior (Cook et al., 2016; Sandwick et al., 2019). Teachers must consider the student's developmental level to support the appropriate learning needed for conflict resolution (Ancess et al., 2019). The student-teacher relationships discussed in the literature espoused that when the teacher was allowed to understand the student's emotional inventory and the potential conflicts they would experience within the school (Chung et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2016).

### **Facilitating Student-Teacher Relationships**

The data throughout the literature does not support the idea of standardized tests, curriculum, or school/class population as a means of school improvement (Asplund & Kilbrink, 2020; Mohamed, 2018). Scales et al.'s (2020) study of high school relationships and student motivation found that school performance and student motivation increased when school districts promoted and facilitated student-teacher relationships. Scales et al.'s research agreed with current literature where school districts implemented programs to facilitate and nurture student-teacher relationships and created a sense of belonging and a family-like atmosphere on their campuses (Sandwick et al., 2019; Turley & Graham, 2019). The literature indicated that school districts must facilitate positive personal interactions between students and teachers for healthy student-

teacher relationships to develop (Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). Scales et al. found in their research that low priority generally is given to facilitating student-teacher relationships; minimal research was done in the literature on how student-teacher relationships change over time and on the outcomes of those changes.

Student-teacher relationship programs were designed to allow students to see their teachers, not as authoritarian figures, but as approachable humans who care about their students' immediate needs (Pekel et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019). Furthermore, students felt comfortable engaging in open, honest communication with their teachers in programs designed to facilitate student-teacher interaction outside the school setting (Ancess et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). Ancess et al. (2019) argued that the facilitated programs' benefits included stronger student-teacher relationships, stronger peer relationships, academic success, student resilience, and conflict resolution. Teachers attending their students' extracurricular activities, connecting with parents, advocating for the student when they get into trouble, and providing sound advice are some of the characteristics of a successfully facilitated program (Sandwick et al., 2019).

School districts have programs already in place, such as elective courses, sports, and other extracurricular activities, that serve as a natural medium to facilitate student-teacher relationships (Ancess et al., 2019; Sandwick et al., 2019). Districts that developed programs to facilitate student-teacher relationships that incorporate the community and are demographically relevant to the student had more success than programs that did not factor in the local demographic (Ancess et al., 2019; Avery et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019). Furthermore, successful student-teacher relationship programs considered environmental factors such as peer interactions, teacher attitudes, teacher-to-student ratio, and local culture (Ancess et al., 2019; Turley & Graham, 2019). Davila's (2020) study of multilingual relationships in high school

found that bilingual students became closer to teachers that attempted to speak their language and participated in their culture.

### **Classroom Management**

Classroom management is a teacher's role in creating a learning environment through discipline to effectively deliver curriculum and establish learning (Akman, 2020; Özen & Yildirim, 2020). Akman (2020) argued that good classroom management is critical to a healthy classroom environment. The teacher is the driving force in classroom management (Özen & Yildirim, 2020). Recent literature concluded that classroom management is a demanding concept and that teachers must determine the proper process to maintain a safe learning environment (Özen & Yildirim, 2020). Özen & Yildirim (2020) argued that classrooms contain unique variables that affect good classroom management.

Classroom management is a well-studied subject. The literature contained ample research on techniques and mitigating factors that affect classroom management (Akman, 2020; Özen & Yildirim, 2020; Selvitopu & Kaya, 2019). Current research concluded that knowledge of a subject alone does not correlate to effective classroom management (Akman, 2020; Özen & Yildirim, 2020; Selvitopu & Kaya, 2019). A common theme in the literature was that classroom management had internal and external influences teachers must contend with to effectively manage their classroom (Akman, 2020; Kaya & Selvitopu, 2019; Özen & Yildirim, 2020). Effective classroom management styles contain initiative encouragement, positive relationships, behavior modeling, and engaging lessons that encourage good behavior (Akman, 2020).

### ***Attachment Style Classroom Management***

Teaching is a demanding activity. It requires a person to manage stress and exhibit patience while delivering information to individuals of different developmental and learning

stages (Columbia et al. 2020; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). The current literature demonstrated that classroom management directly correlated to students' ability to concentrate and self-regulate behavior (Nye et al., 2016; Romi et al., 2016). The literature further demonstrated the direct correlation between student attachment and classroom behavior (Koehn & Kerns, 2018; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). Teachers who promoted attachment bonds in the classroom could manage their classrooms more easily than their peers who did not adopt attachment style management (Columbia et al., 2020; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). Nye et al. (2016) and Romi et al. (2016) determined that schools that facilitated attachment training in their professional development saw fewer classroom disruption cases than their counterparts. The attachment style of classroom management allows learners to develop critical thinking skills that eventually free them from obstacles interfering with their learning (Omodan, & Tsotetsi, 2018).

Omodan and Tsotetsi (2018) suggested that students learn patterns of adaptation in the classroom and transfer the adaptations skill to the next classroom. The more attachments the students develop with their teachers, the easier the adaptation between classes (Koen, 2018; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). Koen (2018) added that interpersonal relationships between the student and teacher are foundational to developing what students want to achieve in the classroom and in life. The literature showed that students who develop these interpersonal skills found it easier to deescalate stressful situations when they arise (Nye et al., 2016; Romi et al., 2016).

**Safe Haven Classroom.** The literature showed that a teacher who practiced attachment classroom management becomes a safe haven when the students feel confident to regulate their emotions within the teacher's proximity (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018; Romi et al., 2016). Research indicated that students that viewed their teacher as an attachment were open emotionally with

them (Koen, 2018; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). The students trusted the attachment and were emotionally vulnerable in their teacher's presence (Romi et al., 2016). During times of sudden, heightened stress, the students decreased the distance from their attachment to receive consolation (Ang et al., 2020; Nye et al., 2016; Romi et al., 2016). Once the emotions were regulated, the student could return to learning within their safe haven (Koen, 2018; Romi et al., 2016).

**Secure Base Teacher.** A teacher who utilizes attachment in their classroom management recognizes that they are the secure base students explore (Nye et al., 2016; Omodan, & Tsotetsi, 2018). The students feel safe in their presence and will explore learning, knowing their attachment is nearby in case of heightened stress (Ang et al., 2020; Verschueren & Spilt, 2020). The students feel safe to explore social constructs in the safety of their secure base (Cooper et al., 2017; Harlow, 2019). The student feels confident that the teacher will guide them in their social development stress (Ang et al., 2020; Harlow, 2019).

**Proximity Maintenance in the Classroom.** Proximity maintenance in the classroom is the students' proximity to the teacher (Koen, 2018; Nye et al., 2016). Attachment theory literature argued that when an attachment increases distance from a child, the child has a heightened stress level (Kim & Cho, 2017; Moto & Matos, 2015). Students with strong attachments to their teacher will experience a yearning for their return (Cooper et al., 2017). When the teacher returns, the students experience an emotional relief that they are in proximity to their teacher (Cooper et al., 2017; Harlow, 2019). The literature found that students experiencing a new substitute teacher demonstrated emotional coldness toward them (Harlow, 2019; Koen, 2018). Students saw the new person as a stranger within the area their attachment existed (Cooper et al.; Nye et al., 2016).

**Student-Teacher Separation Distress.** When students have a healthy attachment to their teacher, they experience a level of separation distress when their teacher is not present (Columbia et al., 2020; Cooper et al., 2017). The literature showed that in prolonged periods of teacher absence, the students had elevated stress levels (Columbia et al., 2020; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). Students demonstrated mild deviant behavior such as classroom disruption or failure to complete work (Koen, 2018; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018). The literature demonstrated that when students have healthy attachments with their teachers, they may feel separation distress and feel no obligation to complete classroom tasks for the substitute teacher (Columbia et al., 2020; Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2018).

### **School Violence**

In a review of existing literature, school violence is not limited to a single country, culture, or socioeconomic status (Bara, 2019; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Duru & Balkis, 2018; Y. Kim et al., 2020). Bara (2019), in her study of violence in Romanian schools, stated that violence is "the set of hostile behaviors that can manifest themselves consciously, unconsciously, ghostly, in order to destroy, degrade, constrain, deny or humiliate an object invested with meaning" (p. 114). Most school violence literature has focused on the correlation between school climate and violence (Bara, 2019; Benbenishty et al., 2016). The literature argued that having a positive school climate is key to lowering school violence instances on a campus (Bara, 2019; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Duru & Balkis, 2018; Y. Kim et al., 2020). Existing literature also indicated that reducing violence on campus will reduce adverse effects on student mental health (Bara, 2019; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Y. Kim et al., 2020).

### **School Shootings**

School shootings are not an uncommon phenomenon in the United States. A literature review discovered that school shootings are rare but conceded an increase in occurrences within the past 40 years (Beland & Kim, 2016; Katsiyannis et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2002). One of the difficulties of researching school shootings is a disagreement within the literature on the definition of "school shooting" (Beland & Kim, 2016; Department of Justice, 2002; Katsiyannis et al., 2018; Scheper-Hughes, 2018). The literature consulted for this research defined a school shooting as an intent by an individual to cause harm to another individual with the use of a gun on a school campus, at an extracurricular activity, or traveling to or from an activity in a vehicle owned by the school district (Beland & Kim, 2016; Department of Justice, 2002; Jaymi Elsass et al., 2016; Scheper-Hughes, 2018).

### ***History of School Shootings***

Though not the first, but one of the most notorious school shootings in U.S. history, Columbine put safety and prevention at the forefront of campus policies (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Curran et al., 2020; King et al., 2019; Malkki, 2014). It also brought an awareness of students who considered themselves outsiders to society, and the social norm an enemy to their cause (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Scheper-Hughes, 2018). Studies started to focus on causal links in school shootings (Baird et al., 2017; Beland & Kim, 2016; Castedo et al., 2018). The literature argued there were not reliable, quantifiable data to pinpoint where or when a school shooting might occur or how to prevent a potential school shooting (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Beland & Kim, 2016; Fiedler et al., 2019). Every shooter is different, and the causes will not be the same (Beland & Kim, 2016).

Other notable school shootings came between the earliest occurrences and Columbine. In 1890 in Brazil, Indiana, a 10-year-old girl was shot by her classmate (*Daily Alta California*,

1890). The motive was the girl informing her classmate's parents of misbehavior at school. In 1983, a 15-year-old student shot two of his peers and committed suicide with no apparent motive (“Fatal Junior High Shooting,” 1999). Before the infamous Columbine massacre, the last significant occurrence occurred in 1998 in Fayetteville, Tennessee, when an 18-year-old shot and killed one of his peers for dating the shooter’s ex-girlfriend (Sharp, 1999).

Current research of the school shooting phenomenon leaves questions unanswered on the reasons behind the shootings (Addington & Muschert, 2019; Ash & Saunders, 2018; Berkowitz & Liu, 2016;). Previous research categorized four causes of school shootings: dispositional, clinical, historical, and contextual (Girard & Aguilar, 2019; Louw et al., 2005). Dispositional factors are age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, cognitive and neurological status (Louw, et al., 2005). Clinical factors included mental disorders or symptoms (Louw et al., 2005). Historical factors included violence, substance abuse, maladjustment, employment instability, and relationship problems (Louw et al., 2005). Contextual factors included availability of professional supervision and support, access to weapons, and social stress (Louw et al., 2005). Oksanen et al. (2014) argued that even though school shootings' most important factor is understanding the school context, research must also include the home context. It implied that a potential shooter does not learn how to take others' lives from the school and connected it to their worldview based on their development of attachments (Ewing et al., 2015; Lei et al., 2016).

**Columbine.** On April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School and killed 12 students and one teacher and wounded 27 others before simultaneously committing suicide in the high school library (Addington & Muschert, 2019b). Columbine changed the way schools addressed prevention and how law enforcement would act to end the violence (Addington & Muschert, 2019b). The new approaches



did not prevent additional shootings. However, the measures to stop shooters changed to reduce casualties (Curran et al., 2020). The Secret Service created a program to assist in analyzing shooting incidents (Lankford et al., 2019).

**Heritage High School.** On May 20, 1999, one month after Columbine, Thomas Solomon walked into Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia, armed with a .22 caliber rifle and opened fire, wounding six students (Watson, 2007). Watson (2007) stated that while there was no underlying motive to this occurrence, Solomon was a copycat shooter and wanted fame in Columbine's wake. Solomon was initially given 40 years but had his sentence reduced to 20 years, and then was released after serving 17 years ("T.J. Solomon, Heritage High School Shooter," 2016).

**Sandy Hook.** On December 14, 2012, in Newton, Connecticut, Adam Lanza entered Sandy Hook Elementary School. He shot and killed 20 children and six adult staff members before taking his own life (Levine & McKnight, 2017). What made this shooting unique was social media's use to provide amateur commentary on the event (Berkowitz & Liu, 2016). One lesson learned from Sandy Hook is that misinformation cannot be contained in the social media world; everyone gets an opinion (DiLeo et al., 2018). It also brought the gun control debate to the forefront in the public's mind (Levine & McKnight, 2017). The main point of contention was whether the occurrence was due to a lack of gun control or a lack of community mental health resources (DiLeo et al., 2018). One positive result of this was that it got people more proactive in prevention issues.

**Marshall County High School.** On January 23, 2018, Gabriel Parker opened fire on students at Marshall County High School in Draffenville, Kentucky (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). Parker visited the campus's band hall to ensure his friends were not there and then proceeded to

the school's common area and opened fire, killing two students and injuring 14 others (“Thursday Marks 2 Years,” 2019). Parker hid among students after the incident but was recognized as the shooter and arrested. The student in this mass incident did not intend to take his own life after the occurrence, which differs from previous mass shootings.

**Parkland School Shooting.** The most infamous school shooting since Columbine is arguably the Parkland shooting. On February 14, 2018, Nicholas Cruz, a 19-year-old former Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student, walked into his alma mater and opened fire (Katsiyannis et al., 2018). He killed 17 people, and 17 others were wounded during the occurrence. He fled the scene and was apprehended near Coral Springs, Florida. After a thorough investigation, no apparent motive was determined or given. More people died in this school shooting than any other in United States history.

**Effects of school shootings.** Immediately following a school shooting, it is common to lay blame on the reason behind the occurrence (Fiedler et al., 2019; Weisbrot, 2008). A blame assumption is a logical approach to the immediate understanding of the occurrence (Ivery & Endicott, 2018). People want answers, and in a high emotional state after a shooting, hindsight is not always clear (Berkowitz & Liu, 2016; Duerr, 2019; Levine & McKnight, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to understand the triggers that led to the occurrence (Anderson & Sabia, 2018; Department of Justice, 2002; Schiering, 2020).

Raitanen and Oksanen (2018) researched interest groups of people formed as a result of the school shooting phenomenon. The study focused on four groups with this sub-culture: researchers, copycats, fangirls, and Columbiners (Raitanen & Oksanen 2018). All the groups fantasize about school shootings, but the copycat group, in particular, caused a need for concern (Raitanen & Oksanen 2018). The copycats wait for a specific school shooting that is appealing to

them and move from the realm of fantasizing to reality to repeat the event as a fan of the original event (Raitanen, & Oksanen, 2018). This attitude is a type of organizational deviance toward the school's authority (Erkutlu, & Chafra, 2018; Raitanen, & Oksanen 2018). The students see the school authority negatively and deviate from their social norms and create their sub-culture (Raitanen & Oksanen 2018). The sub-culture members see themselves as fighters against an unjust leadership and desire to act out toward the people who cause the injustice (Erkutlu, & Chafra, 2018). Seeing a school shooter do acts of violence motivates them to copy and become the hero (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Erkutlu, & Chafra, 2018; Hawdon & Räsänen, 2014; Raitanen, & Oksanen 2018).

**Post-Traumatic Stress After a School Shooting.** Based on the existing literature, after a school shooting occurrence the student stress levels increase (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Beland & Kim, 2016; Fiedler et al., 2020; Haeney et al., 2018; Travers et al., 2018). Most students have not experienced a school shooting (Beland & Kim, 2016; Travers et al., 2018). The literature showed that school shooting victims inadvertently start to band together and form support groups ( Haeney et al., 2018; Räsänen & Oksanen, 2012). The victim support groups have been detrimental to recovery in that they form an “us” and “them” division with their non-victim peers (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Travers et al., 2018). From the literature, students are resilient when it comes to recovery after a school shooting. Only a few victims show chronic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress. (Ash & Saunders, 2018; McDonagh & Elklit, 2018; Travers et al., 2018).

**Community Solidarity.** In times of crisis, communities pull together (Ewing et al., 2015; Numi et al., 2012; Travers et al., 2018). The literature demonstrated that the local community is critical to recovery groups (Haeney et al., 2018; Räsänen & Oksanen, 2012). Räsänen and

Oksanen's (2012) research showed that communities with less individual focus did not offer long-term support to school shooting victims. Victims were left to seek support groups among their peers.

**Stress Development.** From current literature, after the sudden event of a school shooting, the victims' stress levels will increase. The literature contained data that victim stress levels before the occurrence will influence the levels after the occurrence (Orcutt et al., 2014). Orcutt et al.'s (2014) study demonstrated that people with elevated stress levels before a school shooting had little change post-shooting. The literature showed that victims with lower pre-shooting levels of stress had much higher levels post-shooting. The lower stress cases, however, had higher resilience during recovery (Orcutt et al., 2014).

**Youth Responses to School Shootings.** Examining the current literature, youth are resilient in recovery (Travers et al., 2018). A small number of victims have chronic post-traumatic symptoms 3 months after the occurrence. Beland and Kim (2016) conducted a study on student performance after a school shooting. Beland and Kim concluded that the grade level most affected was ninth grade; post-school shooting scores on standardized tests had higher failure rates than other grades. Beland and Kim noted that their conclusion contained multiple outside variables directly related to the shooting.

**Causes of School Shootings.** It is common to lay blame immediately after a school shooting (Benbenishty & Astor, 2009; Ivery & Endicott, 2018; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008). It is a logical assumption that people, especially stakeholders, want answers to understand how it could have been prevented (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008). Weisbrot (2008) found that with the high emotional state of those affected, immediate hindsight is skewed. Nevertheless, it is imperative to understand the influences leading to a school

shooting (Benbenishty & Astor, 2009; Ivery & Endicott, 2018; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008).

A review of the literature on causation of school shootings showed that researchers tried to find the common etiology existing in the phenomenon (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Cornell, 2014; Girard & Aguilar, 2019). Graphic novels and music that glorified violence were believed to be a common influence in school shootings (Anderson & Sabia, 2018; Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017). The literature that agreed with this assumption believed that adolescents read those novels and listen to that music genre to reach a euphoric mental state. (Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017; Girard & Aguilar, 2019) The researchers hypothesized that the potential shooter reached a euphoric plateau and acted out the violence to maintain their euphoria (Anderson & Sabia, 2018; Ash & Saunders, 2018; Baird et al., 2017).

Literature opposing the euphoria hypothesis showed no one common factor could predict a school shooting (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Castedo et al., 2018; Jahn, 2019). However, the literature contained evidence that school climate played a significant role in a school shooting occurrence (Baird et al., 2017; Chen & Astor, 2011; Green, 2017; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Stakeholder perception of a school influenced the students' positive or negative environment (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Castedo et al., 2018; Jahn, 2019). Students with negative attitudes toward their school were more likely to experience violence on their campus (Baird et al., 2017; Benbenishty et al., 2016; Chen & Astor, 2011). Castedo et al. (2018), in their study of violence in Spanish schools, found that broadening the definition of school violence helped maintain a positive campus climate. There was an agreement in the literature on this premise (Baird et al., 2017; Chen & Astor, 2011; Green, 2017; Jahn, 2019; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Students mostly kept at the level of teacher toleration in their behavior (Benbenishty et

al., 2016; Castedo et al., 2018). The less a teacher tolerated, the fewer violent incidents occurred (Castedo et al., 2018).

**School Shootings and Recovery.** A school shooting is an act of violence that leaves students with a sense of dismay and confusion in a place they considered a safe haven (Goff, 2019; Webber & Mascari, 2018). The literature showed that students who experienced a school shooting use a disassociation mechanism to protect themselves from the horror of the event (Baird et al., 2017; Klinger & Klinger, 2018). Based on the existing literature, disassociation may help school shooting victims in the short term. However, it may lead to more mental health problems, which will impede recovery (Lensvelt-Mulders et al., 2008). The students revert to distrusting the teachers, administration, and staff they believed would protect them from extreme violent acts (Ewing et al., 2015). Students must reassociate themselves with their attachment base to progress in their recovery (Ewing et al., 2015; Klinger & Klinger, 2018; Webber & Mascari, 2018).

After such a sudden event as a school shooting, it is only natural to assume that a person's stress levels will increase (DiLeo et al., 2018; Orcutt et al., 2014). The literature regarding school shooting recovery showed that stress levels did, indeed, increase in the students who experienced the event (Baird et al., 2017; Klinger & Klinger, 2018; Webber & Mascari, 2018). Orcutt et al.'s (2014) study showed that people who maintained high stress levels before a school shooting had little change in their stress levels post-shooting. Most students in the literature who experienced a school shooting for the first time had no base of previous experience for recovery (DiLeo et al., 2018; Henry, 2009). Students who experienced a school shooting inadvertently band together and form support groups (Räsänen, & Oksanen, 2012). The research argued that such impromptu support groups were detrimental to the student's emotional recovery because it put them at odds

with other groups (Curran et al., 2020; Goff, 2019; Levine & McKnight, 2017). The literature showed that students who were fully reassociated with their teachers and peers within a month were fully recovered emotionally within 6 months (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Klinger & Klinger, 2018; Webber & Mascari, 2018). It also showed that campuses that facilitated emotional reassociation with teachers and peers recovered quicker than their counterparts on campuses that had no formal reassociation programs (Benbenishty et al., 2016). Studies have shown that, overall, students are resilient when it comes to recovery after a school shooting, with only a small percentage with chronic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress (Webber & Mascari, 2018).

**School Shooting Prevention.** A review of the literature showed that prevention is the focus of combating school violence. Stakeholders want a safe school and believe that a safe school correlates with increased academic performance (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020;). School safety is an issue that transcends all demographics, especially gaining importance during high publicized school shootings (Addington, 2009; Benbenishty et al., 2016).

The literature showed that U.S. schools adopted more visible security measures in response to school shootings (Benbenishty et al., 2016;). The visible measures philosophy is that if people know someone is watching, there would be a decrease in school violence (Beland & Kim, 2016; Berkowitz et al., 2015; Kodelja, 2019). Examples of visible measures are metal detectors, security cameras, and security personnel. Visible measures rely on deterrence to make schools safer (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Deterrence theories imply that criminal activities occur when offenders are offered easy targets with no capable adults present (Ivery & Endicott, 2018; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). An unintended consequence of visible security measures is that they implied the school was unsafe (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Students had a heightened state of stress

in these learning fortresses, and that had detrimental effects on learning (Berkowitz et al., 2015; Kodelja, 2019; Tanner-Smith & Fisher, 2016).

Zero-tolerance policies are another preventive measure covered extensively in the literature (Alnaim, 2018). Zero tolerance aims to focus on punishment (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Curran, 2019; Kodelja, 2019). Zero-tolerance advocates believe that students will avoid violent behavior at their campus if the punishment is severe enough with no room for mercy (Alnaim, 2018; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018). Zero-tolerance policies were in place for several decades as a reaction to increased violence in schools (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Kodelja, 2019; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018). Zero tolerance's primary purpose is punitive discipline (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018). Students punished under this system have received suspensions, expulsions, or alternative campus placement (Kodelja, 2019; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018).

School shooting research literature regarding prevention is inconclusive (Byers et al., 2020; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). The literature agreed that it is imperative to learn if attacks were preventable and to develop a plan to prevent future school shootings (Ivery & Endicott, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008). The United States Secret Service, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education, attempted to answer the preventability question (Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018), but as of today, no literature has provided empirical evidence that any action will lead to school shooting prevention (Ivery & Endicott, 2018; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018; Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008).

The main problem with prevention is the lack of information communicated to potential students (Castedo et al., 2018; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Teachers, the primary observers of behavior on a campus, only provide fragmented information



about potential threats (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Data are fragmented when pertinent information is not exchanged within a school's organization (Byers et al., 2020; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). The literature has indicated that a code of silence exists among students (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018; Weisbrot, 2008). Students observe deviant behavior with peers but neglect to report the issues. It is common for adolescents to protect their peers from adults (Byers et al., 2020; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

The literature has concluded that it is impossible to tell by looking at a student if they will engage in violence (Benbenishty et al., 2016; Castedo et al., 2018; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020). The literature conceded that students reporting any potential threatening behavior could help schools determine if a student will engage in violent behavior (Byers et al., 2020; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018). Byers et al.'s (2020) research studied schools' investments in algorithm software to monitor student social media to determine future violent behavior. Districts justified investing in algorithm software by emphasizing that they are responsible for maintaining a safe learning environment (Byers et al., 2020). Since no rubric can positively identify a potential school shooter, schools must determine what policies to enact to ensure a safe, welcoming learning environment (Byers et al., 2020; Lamoreaux & Sulkowski, 2020; Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 focused on the literature on student-peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, school shootings, the effects of school shootings, and student recovery after a school shooting within the auspices of Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. The literature contained strong evidence that students who had strong attachments to their teachers were more

resilient and recovered faster than their counterparts who experienced a school shooting. The problem that the literature addressed in student-teacher relationships is that many school districts in the United States do not facilitate healthy student-teacher relationships. Thus, little data existed to show the long-term effects of student-teacher relationships on secondary campuses.

Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory stated that when students are attached to a secure emotional base, they operate within a sense of normalcy. Bowlby's theory transcends the student-teacher relationship. Students will attach themselves to their teachers when they believe that those teachers provide an emotionally and physically safe classroom environment. When students feel safe, their level of anxiety is reduced, and learning can take place. Several studies have demonstrated that students attached to their teachers recovered quicker than their counterparts with no attachments to their teachers.

School shootings are a type of violent phenomenon that transcends geography, culture, religion, and socioeconomic status (Beland & Kim, 2016; Cornell, 2014; Department of Justice, 2002; Scheper-Hughes, 2018). School shootings are rare. From an examination of the literature, emotionalization of the phenomenon through media gives the impression that school shootings are more common than what the literature shows.

Research on recovery after a school shooting is approximately 30 years old. The research must be expanded to understand the phenomenon and influence stakeholders further to make changes in policies that will facilitate recovery through the development of student-teacher relationships as a proactive approach to prepare for this act of violence. No two shooters are alike, and victims who are physically or emotionally injured need strong student-teacher relationships as an emotional support base on their campuses.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Chapter 3 discusses the research design and the research methods used in this study. The chapter begins with an overview followed by the design, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with an in-depth look at the trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations.

### **Design**

One of the researcher's first decisions is to determine the method of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research investigates a problem with multiple components in a holistic setting, making it an appropriate choice for this study that will allow teachers to lend their voices to explore their stories to understand student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting. A qualitative case study is tied to a specific time and activity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The participants chosen had experienced a school shooting on a specific date and time and live in the aftermath of the phenomenon, making a case study the appropriate research method.

### **Case Study**

A case study is a type of qualitative research that focuses on a phenomenon within a bounded system (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Some researchers do not consider case studies a method but rather a choice to study the phenomenon within specific boundaries such as time and space (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). However, Yin (2018) referred to the case study as the researcher answering the “how” and “why” within a

niche. The case study approach is the most appropriate method for this study that focuses on a phenomenon that occurred at a specific time and place.

The nature of a case study is the insight within the bounds that govern the researcher (Yin, 2018). In the current case study, I will ask the participants several questions regarding how they perceive their role in creating classrooms that are safe havens and how that perception influences their relationships with students. A single case study approach is appropriate to gain a depth of understanding inclined to a single location, rather than a general approach of several locations (Yin, 2018).

### **Single Instrumental Case Study**

In a single instrumental case study, the researcher chooses a phenomenon and applies the phenomenon to one bounded case to enhance understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2018). The single instrumental case study was the preferred method for the current study because I intended to explore student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting within Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory's framework. Using the single instrumental case study approach to the phenomenon allowed me to immerse myself into the working culture to gain an understanding of student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting on a single campus. The student-teacher relationships are the phenomenon studied in the research, and the 2 year period following the school shooting is the bounded case for the study. The study focused on a single case; therefore, the study's single instrumental approach was the most appropriate method.

### **Research Questions**

The following central research question will guide this single instrumental case study:  
How do teachers describe their experiences regarding student-teacher relationships 2 years later

in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school?

The sub-questions will be as follows:

1. How do teachers describe the process of building student-teacher relationships in their classrooms?
2. How do teachers describe the effects a school shooting had on their student-teacher relationships?
3. How do teachers sustain student-teacher relationships after a school shooting?

### **Setting**

A qualitative case study investigates a phenomenon within the bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The setting chosen for this study is a rural school in the south-central United States. The site will be given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The site was chosen for the qualitative case study because it is a rural south-central United States school that experienced a school shooting.

The site is a high school campus that includes seventh through 12th grades and has a student census of 428 students (State Report Card, 2019). The site's demographic makeup is 94% white, 4% Hispanic, 1% African American and 1% mixed race. The campus has a high poverty rate, with most of the students on free or reduced lunches (State Report Card, 2019). The site has 46 full-time faculty and eight teacher aides (State Report Card, 2019). The site has a principal and an athletic director, who fulfill its administrative duties (School Webpage, 2021). The site is part of a school district with one other campus (State Report Card, 2019). The district is governed by a superintendent and seven elected board members (State Report Card, 2019). Because the site is part of a rural school district, the superintendent is the sole administrator (School Webpage, 2021).

The district is in a rural town in the south-central United States that incorporates approximately 1.8 square miles with a population of 1936 people as of 2018. The town has an agrarian economy, with cotton farming being the primary income source. The town contains no factories or other major industries. The local school district is the primary source of employment within the town. The town has a median household income of \$43,803 and an unemployment rate of 3.3% (State Webpage, 2021).

### **Participants**

Purposeful criterion sampling is appropriate for a study where all participants have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because it is essential that all participants experienced the phenomenon, faculty members employed at the site at the time of the school shooting occurrence will be selected. Purposeful sampling is used when the researcher selects individuals for a study because they can purposely help the researcher understand the research problem and the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The faculty chosen as participants will have experienced the research site school shooting. They will be able to communicate the effects it had on student-teacher relationships. I desire to give these teachers a voice to share their experiences of the phenomenon and its aftereffects. The initial recruitment letter explicitly stated that participants must have been present on the school shooting day.

Furthermore, the participants offered insight on maintaining healthy student-teacher relationships after the school shooting through that data collection process. Faculty for this study was defined as a full-time certified teacher at the site. The study's sample size was 12 participants from a pool of 20 people. Procedures

Approval was obtained from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any study data were collected (see Appendix A). The school district chosen for the study

site consented to participation in this study.

The data collection tools were reviewed by two colleagues in the field with expertise in data collection and analysis. The first reviewer held a doctorate degree in education with a background in interview development and interview analysis. The second reviewer had a doctorate degree in psychology with a background in ethical relationships between students and faculty. The first reviewer recommended adjusting the questions to give a specific time period before and after the school shooting. The first reviewer believed that doing this would prevent confusion with the participants.

The site's District Superintendent gave permission to conduct the study. Immediately after IRB approval, a pilot study of the site was conducted. The purpose of a pilot study was to refine the research method, procedures, and data collection with a smaller number of participants than the actual study (Yin, 2018). This qualitative case study included 12 participants from a pool of 20. I chose three individuals from the total pool to participate in the pilot study. These individuals completed a personal interview, took part in a focus group, and were observed in their classroom. They did not participate in the actual study.

Once the pilot study was completed, I requested from the study site a list of teachers present on the day of the shooting to have a more definitive number for the participant pool. Participants were recruited until the thematic saturation criteria were met (Patton, 2015). After acquiring a list of potential participants, recruitment letters were sent to all faculty asking for volunteers (see Appendix B). The recruitment letter contained the study's purpose, the study's scope, and the participants' commitments. The recruitment letter contained a link to the screening survey for potential participants to ensure they met the minimum criteria for participation in the research (see Appendix C). After the screening surveys were collected, emails were sent to the

accepted and denied respondents as participants in the research (see Appendix D). The accepted participants were given a consent form to sign to participate in the study (see Appendix E). Once I identified the study's willing participants, a face-to-face meeting was scheduled to further explain the research study and answer any questions they might have pertaining to the study. I ensured the participants understood the study's purpose and the procedures for data collection, their right to withdraw from the study, and the protection of the participants' confidentiality. Once the participants were selected for the study, I began data collection by scheduling interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. During the personal interviews and focus groups, audio recordings and transcripts were used while collecting the data. For the classroom observations, notes were used to record observations of the teacher's interactions with students.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am the key instrument of this research study. I collected data through personal interviews and focus groups using open-ended questions and observation rubrics designed by me instead of relying on other researchers' instruments (Creswell, 2013). I addressed biases and preconceived ideas during data collection to not cloud the focus of the participants' lived experiences (Yin, 2018). I maintained a reflexive journal (see Appendix I) to address potential biases throughout the research process.

I am employed at the research site and was present on the day of the school shooting. During my employment at the school, I have witnessed positive and negative student-teacher relationships before and after the school shooting incident. The participants chosen were teachers over whom I have had no authority. I am a classroom teacher and have never held a position to evaluate or supervise another teacher at the study site. Because of my familiarity with the research site, I was aware of the possibility of research bias. To counter bias, I constructed and



maintained a reflexive journal for the study (Yin, 2018). The reflexive journal allowed other inquirers to review my findings and look backward to the evidence to ensure that the findings are supported in the data (Yin, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research is based on gathering data through personal experiences in certain situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2018) listed documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts as valid media for case study research. Yin further stated that these media complement each other, and at least three evidential sources are needed for data triangulation. Individual interviews and focus groups encourage participants to express their opinions about the interview questions and to assist the researcher in question management (Yin, 2018). Direct observations allow the researcher to observe the participants in a real-world setting to monitor their behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

### **Interviews**

Yin (2018) stated that case studies, more than any other research method, require the researcher to have an inquiring mind during the data collection process. The case study researcher must develop good questions to ensure a continuous dialogue throughout the data collection phase (Yin, 2018). Detailed information is provided when a researcher prompts the participants to formulate an in-depth perspective based on the researcher's questions (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The interviews were semi-structured and conducted with participants in person at the study site after the completion of the workday. With the participant's permission, the interview was recorded via audio. Audio recordings allowed me to obtain the unedited

perspectives of the participant (Yin, 2018). Open-ended questions were used to allow the participant to reflect on their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions (see Appendix F)

1. Why did you choose teaching as your career?
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. Describe your philosophy on maintaining healthy relationships at work.
4. What process do you use to build healthy student-teacher relationships?
5. Looking back at your previous answer, what do you feel are the critical aspects of building healthy student-teacher relationships?
6. Describe to me your typical day of teaching.
7. Describe your day of teaching on the day of the school shooting.
8. What were your immediate concerns for your students that day?
9. Describe your relationships with students before the shooting.
10. What were the immediate effects the school shooting had on your relationships with your students?
11. How have your relationships with students changed since the shooting?
12. What do you do to foster relationships with your students?
13. What challenges have you faced with maintaining relationships with your students that experienced the school shooting?
14. How do your students know that they are secure physically and emotionally in your classroom?
15. How do your students know that you care about them?

16. Describe some specific things you do to foster an atmosphere of care in your classroom.

17. Why would a student feel safe, both emotionally and physically, in your classroom?

18. Please share anything else that you believe will bring a better understanding of student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting.

Questions 1 and 2 were used as opening questions to the interview. A case study interview is considered an unstructured casual conversation that creates a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Yin, 2018). These questions allowed the participant to feel at ease with me to become more open to their experiences. Questions 3 and 4 were used to understand each teacher's process to build healthy relationships with students. Positive peer-adult relationships contribute to adolescents' mental health (Shipley et al., 2018; Ttofi et al., 2011). Questions 3 and 4 also helped to answer the main research question and sub-questions concerning student-teacher relationships. Question 5 allowed the teachers to reflect on their previous answers to contemplate what they feel is the central motivation for building healthy student-teacher relationships. An experienced teacher should have insight into their students' needs and develop relationships to meet those needs (Chandrasegaran & Padmakumari., 2018; Pekel et al., 2018). Questions 6 and 7 prompted the teachers' thoughts on a typical day of teaching and what they experienced the day of the shooting. Questions 8 and 9 elicited more definitive answers in the interview. The questions gave participants the ability to answer while focusing on the experience and describing the experience altogether (Yin, 2018). Teachers with healthy relationships with their students will have an immediate concern for their safety during a school shooting (Bowlby 1982; Dowd et al., 2013; Kearns & Hart, 2017). Questions 10 and 11 attempted to understand the immediate effects the school shooting had on student-teacher relationships. Teachers with healthy

relationships with their students create a safe haven in their classroom where the students feel secure in the presence of their teacher (Bowlby, 1982; Mota & Matos, 2015). After an incident of violence such as a school shooting, the concept of safe haven is broken (Bowlby, 1982; Mota & Matos, 2015). Teachers must reestablish that safe haven for students to feel safe, and for learning to occur (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015). Questions 12 and 13 allowed the participants to reflect on the phenomenon and its impact on student-teacher relationships. Student-teacher relationships are especially crucial for students who have experienced a school shooting and the difficulties related to the phenomenon (Beland & Kim, 2016; Bowlby, 2005; Lei et al., 2016; Talley, 2018). The relationships developed between the student and teacher contribute to the student feeling secure in the classroom (Bowlby, 2005). Questions 14 and 15 had the participants reflect on the processes they used to rebuild healthy student-teacher relationships. The questions also asked the teacher to reflect on these processes and how the students have confidence that they are in a secure environment. Students who perceive their classroom as safe will view it as a safe haven and operate with reduced stress (Bowlby, 1982; Dowd et al., 2013). Questions 16 and 17 were the final questions and were meant for the participant to reflect on the phenomenon deeply. Question 16 was intended for the participant to reflect through the interview and to communicate why they think they provide a safe classroom. A teacher that provides parental care allows the student to feel at ease in the teacher's proximity (Beland & Kim, 2016; Bowlby, 2005; Lei et al., 2016; Talley, 2018). Question 17 allowed the participants to add anything they feel will contribute to the case study.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A copy of the transcription was provided to the participants. The participants were asked to review their interview transcript to check it for accuracy and make any changes in what they said. As part of this review, the

participants were asked to ignore any grammatical errors that were made as part of their everyday language.

### **Focus Groups**

In a qualitative case study, the inclusion of focus groups will allow for the group's shared experiences to provide a more holistic approach to understanding the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The focus group allows participants who have different ideas about the phenomenon to discuss their perceptions in a group and allowing the researcher to gather a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Two focus groups were held with the participants. The focus groups were scheduled at the end of the school day and on different days to allow the participants' options convenient for their schedule. I looked for commonalities within the interview answers and determined if more data were needed to add clarity to the phenomenon. The focus group lasted 1 hour. I moderated the meeting to ensure participants stayed on topic and their time was honored. The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed, with a copy of the transcription given to the participants to make suggestions on corrections, which ensured the data collection's validity (Yin, 2018).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions (see Appendix G)

1. Please introduce yourself to the group.
2. Describe your role in fostering student-teacher relationships in your classroom.
3. How have your student-teacher relationships in your classroom changed since the school shooting?
4. Describe how you have modeled that your classroom is a safe haven.
5. What are your overall beliefs on maintaining positive student-teacher relationships while dealing with the emotional trauma created by a school shooting?

6. What would you like to see more regarding student-teacher relationships on your campus?
7. How has district policy affected your ability to foster student-teacher relationships on campus?
8. What types of policies can the district enact to facilitate healthy student-teacher relationships?
9. What would the group like to add to this interview as a recommendation for other teachers regarding student-teacher relationships?

Question 1 was chosen to create a relaxed atmosphere among the focus group. Case study interviews are semi-casual conversations in which the researcher gathers data (Yin, 2018).

Questions 2 and 3 reflected on the personal interview questions. They allowed the participants to see each other's views and processes regarding fostering healthy student-teacher relationships before and after the 2018 school shooting. These questions also helped to answer the central research question and sub-questions concerning student-teacher relationships. When teachers develop strong attachment bonds with their students, it can affect the entire campus climate (Bowlby, 2005). Questions 4 and 5 allowed the participants to reflect on how they create a safe haven in the classroom and their beliefs that influenced creating the safe havens. Safe havens contain a degree of happiness, self-control, and social interaction that manifests through the individual (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015). Question 6 allowed the participants to reflect on potential changes their school districts can enact to foster healthy student-teacher relationships on their campus. Scales, et al.'s (2020) study of high school relationships and student motivation found that school performance and student motivation increased when school districts promoted and facilitated student-teacher relationships. Questions

7 and 8 allowed the participants to reflect on district policies and their effect on student-teacher relationships. Student-teacher relationship programs were designed to allow the student to see their teachers, not as authoritarian figures, but approachable humans who care about their students' immediate needs (Chung et al., 2019; Pekel et al., 2018; Sandwick et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2020). Question 9 was the final question and allowed the participants' voices to be heard with other educators regarding student-teacher relationships.

### **Observations**

Case studies create opportunities for researchers to observe a phenomenon in a real-world setting (Yin, 2018). I formally observed the participants' classrooms. I scheduled a specific time to conduct the direct observations. I conducted three separate direct observations of the participants. The observations lasted the duration of the 52-minute class period scheduled with the participant. There were no electronic recording devices used, a measure taken to protect the students' privacy. The formal observation allowed me to look at the participants' interviews and focus groups' information and view it real time (Yin, 2018). I gained a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through these observations (Yin, 2018). An observation protocol was developed to record observations and reflections of the participants' classrooms (see Appendix H). The observation protocol contained descriptive and reflective field notes. I did not participate in classroom activities. A copy of the observation protocol with my notes was given to the participant after the observation to allow the participant to make suggestions on corrections, ensuring the data collection's validity (Yin, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted after all data were collected. According to Yin (2018), "analysis of case study evidence is one of the least aspects of doing case studies" (p. 165).

Unlike statistical analysis, case study analysis has no specific formula for analyzing the data (Yin 2018). Yin (2018) stated that “much depends on a researcher’s own style of rigorous empirical thinking, along with sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration to alternative interpretations” (p. 165). Attending to all the evidence, investigating all plausible rival interpretations, focusing on the most critical aspect of the study, and demonstrating familiarity with the current literature on the subject are the basis for quality in case study research (Yin, 2018). To attend to the evidence in this research, I ensured all findings were rooted in the evidence, not to leave any loose ends to foster alternative interpretations. Within the analysis, I highlighted the participants' common thinking to demonstrate familiarity with the subject matter. These findings helped me understand student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school.

The greatest strength of a case study is using multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018). Using multiple sources allowed me, the researcher, to triangulate the data to understand the phenomenon in depth. The research consisted of interviews, focus groups, and direct observations to collect data. One type of data may elicit information that others do not produce (Yin, 2018). After the collection phase was completed, the data were analyzed. Yin (2018) has recommended four strategies and five techniques that the researcher should choose from when analyzing data. I used Yin’s (2018) theoretical propositions strategy and time-series analysis technique to analyze the data.



### **Theoretical Propositions**

First, I relied on the theoretical propositions that led me to do the case study, which influenced me to develop the research questions and literature review (Yin, 2018). Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory was the theoretical proposition behind the research. I researched rival hypotheses to Bowlby's attachment theory and determined if factors outside the theoretical framework influenced the study's outcome (Yin, 2018). The data analysis consisted of keyword and theme coding for this specific case study (Yin, 2018). A condensed keyword table of responses was created (Patton & Patton, 2015). Keywords were then analyzed to find patterns (Yin, 2014). To ensure I focused on the theoretical propositions, I compared all findings to the research questions. Yin (2018) stated that "questions are posed to you, the researcher, not to an interviewee" (p. 99). I ensured that the critical data needed to answer the research question and sub-questions were satisfied. If the data points toward the research questions, it satisfies the theoretical propositions of the study.

### **Time-Series Analysis**

Time-series analysis is used in case study research when measuring behavior over a period of time (Yin, 2018, p. 181). The time-series analysis is appropriate for analyzing the data that explores the effect of student-teacher relationships over a specific time. Yin (2018) stated that "the ability to trace changes over time is a major strength of case studies" (p. 182). The research question answered was connected to a time period and the potential changes during that time. A simple time series analysis was used for this case study. In a single time-series analysis, one singular relevant measure is tracked over a time period (Yin, 2018). The singular measure for the current case study was student-teacher relationships. The period for the time-series analysis was 2 years after the school shooting at the study site.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (1985) determined that credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability must be interwoven throughout the thematic research analysis to ensure trustworthiness. The researcher must convince their reader that their findings are worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study will use Lincoln and Guba's (1985) precepts to maintain trustworthiness.

### **Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (2018), in their study on credibility, insisted that to increase the probability of credible findings, "there are three such activities: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation" (p. 307). Through the research interviews, focus groups, and direct observations, data triangulation occurred to build a coherent justification for themes. Member checking was used for participants to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy and make suggestions with corrections. Member checking allows the participants to give immediate feedback on transcription errors and challenge interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were given transcripts of interviews, focus groups, and observations for review. Participants were encouraged to give feedback regarding transcription accuracy and interpretations. Participant proactivity helps increase credibility and gives an external check on the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Establishing trustworthiness is crucial to instill credibility in findings (Patton, 2015). In this single instrumental case study, a reflexive journal was kept for transparency toward any biases I had throughout the study (see Appendix I). Reflexivity in research is when a researcher's

biases, whether intentional or not, influence the participant's responses or the line of questioning asked to the participant (Yin, 2018).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

The research process must be clearly documented so a reader can examine the entire process to determine if the research is dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process must be logical, traceable, and thoroughly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that an audit may be conducted to demonstrate dependability.

Confirmability is established when the researcher demonstrates that the findings are distinctly derived from the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). An external auditor was used to ensure the objectivity of the data and establish dependability and confirmability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A higher education colleague familiar with singular case study methodology and student-teacher relationships was used to conduct the external audit. Researcher notes were kept via audio recordings and transcribed. The notes explained my actions throughout the entire research process. The transcription of my audio notes and copies of the data transcriptions acquired from my participants were given to the external auditor for review and to ensure that my findings were dependable and confirmable.

### **Transferability**

According to Yin (2018), transferability and generalizability are common concerns in case study research. The key to generalizability in the case study is demonstrating the study's theoretical constructs and expanding and generalizing theories (Yin, 2018). I gave a detailed description of the study for the reader to understand the theoretical constructs of the study and how the study expanded those constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). I used an audit trail for readers to understand the research process and methods chronologically as it

happened (see Appendix J). Having an audit trail allows the reader to scrutinize the evidence of choices regarding the researcher's theoretical and methodological issues and the rationale affecting those choices (Koch, 1994).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study is to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The study and its findings were not an indictment of the site or its employees. The participants were never in any danger throughout the case study. All data collection was done at the study site unless a conflict arose, in which case video conferencing or teleconferencing was used. Face-to-face interviews in a familiar environment were done to minimize anxiety during data collection.

The reality of ethical issues is that they can develop during any case study stage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Permission was secured from Liberty University's IRB and the study site administration. Informed consent was obtained from all volunteers before participation in the study. Participants and the study site received pseudonyms to protect the participants' and the site's identities. All electronic files were password-protected, and physical data were kept in a locked cabinet to be destroyed within 3 years of the study's completion. All ethical considerations or implications of the research were discussed with participants and the site administration. There were several ethical implications to consider for the research. All physical data collected were stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data were assigned a password for access. To ensure that no unethical influence happened, no participant was or has been under my direct supervision. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms for all participants and the study site.

## Summary

Chapter 3 describes the single instrumental case study approach used to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting in a rural south-central United States school. The research methodology and rationale were clearly stated and justified as to why the methodology was appropriate for the study. A detailed description of the site and participant criteria was given. My role was discussed to add transparency and illuminate my motivations for the study. The procedures to safeguard the study's trustworthiness criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were discussed. Chapter 3 concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations that will be evident throughout the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The problem that this study explored was to understand the importance of student-teacher relationships after a school shooting. Participants for the study were 12 certified public high school teachers present on the day of the shooting. The participants consisted of one art teacher, one biology teacher, three English teachers, three social studies teachers, one special education teacher, two math teachers, and one consumer science teacher. The study site is a seventh through 12th-grade campus. Personal interviews, two focus groups, and classroom observations were the means of data collection. The data were analyzed using theoretical propositions based on Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory. Additionally, a single time-series analysis was used for data analysis. In a single time-series analysis, one singular relevant measure is tracked over a period of time (Yin, 2018). The singular measure for this case study was student-teacher relationships. The period for the time-series analysis was the 2 years after the school shooting at the study site. The analysis process identified patterns and recurring themes that emerged, in order to discover the effects of student-teacher relationships 2 years after a school shooting. Chapter 4 includes themes and patterns discovered in the data and a participant background table.

### **Participants**

Each of the participants in the study was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. The sample size was 12 certified public high school teachers in the south-central region of the United States. Each participant responded to the same 18 open-ended questions during personal

interviews. Nine of the 12 participants participated in the focus groups. Three of the participants had conflicts due to playoff games. The focus groups responded to nine open-ended questions. Both focus groups responded to the same open-ended questions. Each participant's classroom was observed three separate times. An observation protocol was developed for the classroom observations. A description of the participants is found below (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Teacher Participants*

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Content Area	Grade Level
Anna	21	Masters	Math	9th - 12th
Bill	19	Bachelors	Social Studies	7th - 8th
Blair	10	Masters	Science	9th – 12th
Carmella	8	Bachelors	Consumer Science	9th – 12th
Johnny	20	Bachelors	Social Studies	9th – 12th
Juana	24	Bachelors	Spanish	9th – 11th
Mandy	20	Masters	Library Science	7th – 12th
Maria	21	Bachelors	Special Education	EC – 12th
Nannette	6	Bachelors	English	7th – 8th
Naomi	15	Bachelors	Math	7th – 8th
Stephanie	8	Masters	Physical Education	7th – 12th
Timmy	16	Art and Technology	Art	7th – 12th

## Results

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Data analysis of the personal interviews, focus groups, and observation protocols were used to identify codes and patterns to identify categories. Codes were identified by noting repetitive keywords. After the development of codes, categories were assigned as themes were developed from the categories.

After I transcribed the data, each participant reviewed the data from their interview, focus group, and observation protocol. I coded the data using a Microsoft Word macro. For qualitative analysis, the macro allowed me to code the data into a document table. The macro segregated the common words and phrases by frequency. Similar words and phrases from the interviews and focus groups were grouped. The observation protocol was compared to the groupings to confirm that the data collected matched what happened in real time. The codes were placed into categories based on their relation to the research questions (see Table 2). The frequency of the common codes was high, so there was no need to reduce the number of codes.

After transcribing and segregating the collected data, they were analyzed using a Microsoft Word macro. Synonymous codes from the different data collections were grouped. Combining the similar patterns under the appropriate code resulted in identifying three themes that revealed the effects of student-teacher relationships 2 years in the aftermath of a school shooting (see Table 2). The three themes identified were interrelated, connected, and protector. The interrelated and connected themes, though similar, differed in that the interrelated theme dealt with the specific commonalities the participants utilized with their students, and the connected theme dealt with the bonds the participants formed with their students. The connected



theme was divided into two subthemes: Connection with students who experienced the shooting and connection with students who did not experience the shooting. The protector theme was divided into the subthemes of emotional protector and physical protector. The interviews' and focus groups' questions' intent was for the participants to focus on their relationships with their students and the impact the school shooting had on those relationships. The questions were formulated as such to bring about thick descriptions of student-teacher relationships after a school shooting. The dominant themes identified were relevant to the research questions. The themes were consistent with current literature regarding student-teacher relationships, attachment, and the effects of school shootings, all of which assisted in the answering of the research questions.

Table 2

*Theme Development*

Codes	Themes	Sub-Themes
Connection		
Rapport	Interrelated	
Common Interests		
Real		
Allow Expression		Connection with students who experienced the shooting
Vulnerable	Connected	
Family		Connection with students who did not experience the shooting
Trust		
Sacrifice		
School Shooting		
First Defense		Emotional Protector
Check Fear	Protector	
Split Decision		Physical Protector
Human Shield		

**Interrelated**

The interrelated theme as it applied to the current study was used to describe the initial commonalities the participants sought with their students. The participants believed that there must be an interrelatedness between the teacher and student. Bill said in his interview, “There

has to be a starting point. You have to find something, anything to relate to your students.” The participants’ personal interviews and focus groups provided insight into how they sought commonalities to relate to their students. The participants provided practical examples in real time on how they related to their students in the classroom observations.

Nannette said, “When I get new students, I look for things in their life that I can relate to. This has a dual purpose that it gives me a foundation to build a relationship with them, and it lets them know that teachers are real people too.” The participants believed that finding an area to relate to students was essential for a healthy classroom. Blair, in her interview, said, “The first few weeks of teaching are about finding things in common with the students to relate to them.” Anna stated in her interview, “I see these kids as my babies, so I have to find something I can relate to with my babies. Healthy families have things in common.” During Johnny’s classroom observation, he mentioned to a shy student that he was neighbors with his uncle. It was a way to relate to the student outside the academic context to put the student at ease. The student seemed more comfortable during the lesson after Johnny showed common ground. Juana’s classroom observation revealed that she used family connections to relate to students. Relating to family was common in the classroom observations. The site was in a rural town with a small population. Most of the participants were from the study site’s location and went to school with the students’ parents.

The participants believed that connecting with their students was an essential aspect of building relationships with them. Some participants stated that some connections are commonalities outside the classroom, while some commonalities are the class itself. Timmy stated, “Art is a way for me to connect with my students who have nothing else in common with anyone.” Timmy felt that art was a class where his students could communicate abstractly in a

pictorial interpretation of their feelings. During Timmy's classroom observation, he could translate the mood of a student by their artwork. Several of the participants also had coaching assignments at the school. The participants who also coached felt that sports were a medium to relate to students. Johnny said, "I feel that sports are where I relate to my students. In a small school, pretty much everyone is in sports, so sports is the starting point." During Bill's classroom observation, his students would mimic his coaching mannerisms before the class began. Maria said in her interview, "When they join sports, it makes it easy to relate to them. Sports is what you have in common." Before her class began, Stephanie would talk sports to her students to put them at ease before the academic instruction began. During Naomi's classroom observation, she would incorporate sports terminology into her math lesson.

During the first focus group, Carmella stated, "I have the students fill out a questionnaire to get to know them and see commonalities I may have with them." The other participants used a similar model to get to know their students. Juana said, "There are interests between us and the students that are interrelated. It is up to us to figure out what those are." Participants felt that the first 2 weeks of school were time to get to know their students to build a family-like atmosphere in the classroom. In the first focus group, Mandy said, "Students who like books will already be drawn to the library. I can relate to them through books." In the second focus group, Timmy said, "Thinking about relating to students, we have to remember that we set up these relationships appropriately. That the student remembers that even though we are trying to relate to them, we are still their teacher and not their peer." Blair and Anna agreed with Timmy's statement and reiterated that the relationships were still professional yet personal.

During the first focus group, Carmella said, "You have to find a connection to build rapport with the students. It does not happen magically." During Carmella's observation, she

built a rapport with her students through the medium of cooking. Carmella was observed standing side-by-side with her students at the ovens while they cooked their recipes. She reminded them to be careful around the hot ranges while giving tips on making their meals more flavorful. When asked a follow-up question on building rapport, Mandy said, “The common ground is what the rapport is built on.” Naomi, Stephanie, Juana, and Carmella agreed with Mandy’s rapport-building statement during the first focus group.

### **Connected**

Several codes developed the connected theme. The connected theme differed from the interrelated theme. The connected theme dealt with the participants' bond with their students. Each participant mentioned in their interviews that their classrooms were more than a place to learn. Blair said, “This is a place where we learn and grow together.” During her first observation, Blair’s classroom was dimly lit, and she used pastel colors along the wall to give a soothing atmosphere. During the first focus group, Mandy quipped, “Sometimes I get teased because I make connections with students who really don’t fit in other places. But I’m actually proud of that.” During an observation of Mandy in the library, she would ask students what types of books interested them and try to order genres that the students enjoyed. Mandy also had a book club where the students could meet and discuss novels while enjoying refreshments. The book club was an activity to connect with her and other like-minded students. The participants’ classrooms were a place to develop family-like bonds where the students learn as a unit. During her classroom observation, Juana had colorful posters of Spanish countries plus crafts that the students made on display around her classroom. Juana also taught English learners and used her Spanish fluency to connect with Spanish-speaking students who did not have a command of English. Juana said in her interview, “Sometimes they just cannot express themselves in English

and are more comfortable speaking to me in Spanish.” Maria, who was also bilingual in her classroom observation, spoke to non-native English speakers in Spanish as a connection point.

The participants acknowledged in the interviews and focus groups that to achieve connections in the classroom, there must be liberty for students to express their opinions free of judgment. Juana stated, “You get to know them, that they are more than just that little 15-year-old that's sitting there.” The participants stated in some form during the focus groups that the school shooting did not affect their student-teacher relationships. In the second focus group, Mandy stated, “We just keep doing what we always did, and the students trusted us.” Timmy and Anna agreed with her statement. The participants witnessed a distrust between the students and the school as an entity. Johnny said in his interview, “The students saw the building as a dangerous place, and we had to use our connections with them to put them at ease.” The participants believed that the district erred in requiring the students to be in class the next day. In his interview, Bill said the following:

They just had a long traumatic day, and they were required to go back to ground zero the next day. I mean, they ate in the cafeteria where it happened and walked by the spot where the victim lay receiving care until she was care flighted away. You don't just get over that in a day.

The participants believed the students still trusted their teachers. Nannette said in her interview, “They looked to us for comfort and safety after that day. They were broken emotionally, and we carried that burden willingly.” The participants used the connection formed before the shooting to nurture a sense of security at the school. Timmy said in his interview, “They knew I did my best that day to keep them safe, and they expected me to do the same the days following. I had a connection with the students, and that was the point of trust with them.”

The participants understood the magnitude of this responsibility. Blair stated in her interview, “No teaching went on that week. I discussed what happened with my students and allowed them to express their feelings.” Carmella said during her interview, “The week after was discussing what happened and opening up about their feelings. Our connection allowed them to be open and be vulnerable with their feelings.”

### ***Connection With Students Who Experienced the Shooting***

During the focus groups, the participants were asked about the effects the shooting had on their relationships with their students. The participants believed that it created a new connection with the students who experienced the event. Mandy said in the focus group,

You know, this was a new dynamic in our connection with the students. Very few teachers and students have gone through a school shooting. That put us in a very small percentage of people. They can go through their whole life and not meet another person who experienced this. It is a connection like no other.

Timmy’s classroom observation revealed that he stayed in closer proximity to the students who experienced the shooting. He was also cognizant of the loud, sudden noises that might cause an emotional outburst. Stephanie said in her interview, “We had to give special attention to their surroundings. We did not want them to get jumpy and have their anxiety up there.” There was a track meet the same week as the school shooting. Billy said in his interview, “When the starter pistol was shot, our kids would duck and huddle. We had to keep a close eye on those that were at the shooting.” When prompted about the track meet in his interview, Johnny stated, “Yeah, our kids were skittish. We had to make sure we warned them before a race they would hear a pistol.”

The participants believed that the unique connection they now had caused them to advocate for the students who experienced the tragedy. Naomi stated in her interview, “Those students needed and still need a lot of love. That connection we have with them has them looking at us to care for them.” Within the 2 years after the school shooting, there was a change in administration. Also, several new teachers were hired after the shooting. Juana said in her interview, “You know that new principal and those new teachers had no clue what these kiddos went through.” Stephanie quipped in her interview, “Most of them thought the kids were milking it to get out of work and needed to get over it. Those kids looked to us to protect them.”

### ***Connection With Students Who Did Not Experience the Shooting***

Starting with the new school year, the school had students new to the campus who did not experience the shooting. Each year there were fewer students who were on campus the day the shooting happened. At the time of the current study, the sophomore, junior, and senior classes were the only students present the day of the shooting. The participants believed that new students were cognizant of the unique connection between the teachers and students present the day of the shooting. Johnny stated in his interview, “They know there is a special connection between us. It is not an ‘us’ and ‘them’ but just a different bond.” In the first focus group, Juana said, “You have to be careful not to exclude those students or look like you are playing favorites. There’s connection that exists they do not understand.”

The students and faculty at the study site experienced several real-world lockdowns after the shooting. The participants believed that students who did not experience the shooting event do not take the drills or real-world events seriously. Stephanie said in her interview, “The new kids just did not get it. That connection just wasn’t there for them to understand the importance of it.” Maria’s classroom observation revealed that students would leave and go to the restroom



and prop her door open. Other students would close it when they noticed it was propped open. When asked about this during her interview, Maria stated, “That is the difference between someone who was here that day and someone who wasn’t.”

### **Protector**

The protector theme had the most frequent codes. The participants saw themselves as guardians. The participants were willing and proved that they were ready to protect their students at all costs during the shooting. The participants were willing to give their own lives, if need be, to protect their students. Maria stated, “We had no place to barricade in my office. I told my students that if the shooter came to the window, they were to lay down, and I would lay on top of them to block the bullets.” Carmella locked her students in a closet and told them not to open the door for any reason. Carmella said, “The shooter had two locked doors and me to get through before he could hurt my students.” Timmy pointed to a hammer by the window during his interview and said, “That is a means of escape or defense to get my students out of harm’s way.”

### ***Emotional Protector***

The participants agreed that the first thing they felt obligated to protect after the shooting was the students’ emotional state. The participants knew that these students would suffer emotional distress at least in the short term. Slammed doors and other loud noises had the students on edge, and in some instances, they suffered emotional meltdowns. The students saw their teachers as safe people they could run to. While the district brought in crisis counselors to help the students, they wanted their teacher in times of high stress. Naomi stated, “Last year, I had a student at the lake during the Fourth of July. Fireworks started going off, and my student called me screaming for me to help her. She was face down on the ground having an emotional meltdown, and the only thing she knew to do was to call her teacher.”

Emotional meltdowns were common the first few weeks after the shooting. Anna said during the second focus group, “Emotions were high, and everyone was on edge. Every time a book dropped or a door slammed, students would jump or shake and take a while to calm down.” Juana said in her interview, “Sometimes you just hugged them and cried with them.” Maria said in her interview, “Sometimes a student, whether mine or not, would come to my room and just put their head down to calm down.” Mandy, while reflecting on providing emotional protection during the first focus group, said, “So I think part of creating that safe environment is just the kids knowing that when they don't feel like they can put on the brakes, somebody else is going to for them.”

### ***Physical Protector***

The participants believed that they were the first line of physical defense for their students. They believed they had experienced the worst of school tragedies. They felt a more immediate need to ensure their students were physically protected. When asked about students' physical safety, Timmy always pointed to the hammer next to the window. Timmy stated, “My students see that, and they know what it is for. It is for them.”

During the classroom observations, it was evident that the participants believed in their student's physical safety. Every participant shut their doors and locked them at the beginning of class. Stephanie stated in her interview, “We used to leave the doors open, and students could freely walk in and out the classrooms. You just cannot do that anymore.” Juana's observation revealed that students had propped the locked door at the end of the hall open to gain reentry to the main hall. Juana, pointing this out in her interview, said, “It's like some of them don't remember we had a shooter here just a bit ago.” The participants felt that they were responsible for ensuring that the doors were kept secure. Maria stated in her interview,

The next-door down from mine leads to the outside. The students will beat on the door to get someone to let them in. I've told them several times there is one way in and out, and it is not there.

Billy revealed during his classroom observation that he kept the curtains closed to his classroom windows. When asked about the curtains in his interview, Billy said, "I have five windows with a clear view of the road right there. No one needs to be peeking in. It also gives me a means of escape if we need a quick exit." Juana pointed at her windows during the focus group and said, "We are sitting ducks in here." Bill said in his interview, "I don't have windows like the others. There is one way in and out. If the bad guy comes in, well, he's just going to have a fight on his hands."

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

There was one outlier finding that was not aligned with a specific research question or theme. Each participant made a specific reference to the outlier during their interview and focus groups. The participants in their interviews and focus groups agreed that there was mistrust between the students and the school as an entity. Johnny said, "The school let them down. The students did not expect to come to school thinking it would be their last day on Earth." The consensus on this outlier among the participants was that the students felt forced to return to school the next day. Most of the participants felt the students saw this as the district not taking their feelings toward the shooting seriously. Bill said in his interview,

There was just no trust between the students and the district. You know, I felt at times I was the mediator of the two. On the one hand, the district is making all these policies to harden the school, and you have to toe the party line in public but let your students know you're there for them.

Stephanie revealed in her classroom observation that she had to address issues, legitimate or not, in a way that showed her students that the district could be trusted. Stephanie expressed in her interview, “You cannot prevent these things [shootings]. It’s going to happen, and everyone has to blame someone. Unfortunately, they blame the school.” In the second focus group, Anna, Blair, and Timmy believed that part of the mistrust between the district and students was that an entity cannot build a relationship with a person. Blair said, “How do you trust a building? There is nothing organic about it.” Timmy quipped, “We’ve had a change of district and high school admin several times since the shooting. How do you trust something that cannot provide stability?” Anna followed up on Timmy’s answer with, “You don’t open up to people you know won’t stay.”

### **Research Question Responses**

For the current study, one central research question and three sub-questions guided the research. The research questions were satisfied by analyzing the data from the personal interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The themes that developed from the current study were compared to the research questions.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do teachers describe their experiences regarding student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school? The teachers believed the relationships they developed with their students before and following the shooting were solid and stable. Nanette expressed in her interview,

We kept doing what we always did, and our relationships with our students are strong. I think I can connect with them, even on a deeper level, because now we had something,

like trauma-related, that we were on this same playing field. We kind of had the same common ground.

Carmella said in her interview, “It wasn't based on what happened that day. In other words, your relationship stayed the same. They knew they could trust you. They could lean into you because of the relationship you developed before the school shooting.” Nannette expressed in her interview, “I wouldn't say that they've changed too much. I've had a couple that come and talked to me a little bit more.” Blair stated in the second focus group, “I wouldn't say that mine changed a whole lot. I feel like I still do a lot of the same things that I've always done. The same relationships that I've always had.” Timmy stated during the second focus group, “I think I am more in tune to their emotional wellbeing.” Anna agreed with Timmy's statement and expressed, “I think I see more kids struggling than I did before. Yeah, and I think I just pay attention to that a little bit more than I did.” During Bill's classroom observation, it an emotional connection was noticeable when he spoke to his students. During Johnny's classroom observation, it was noted that he had minimum things on the wall. When asked about his lack of classroom decorations, Johnny quipped, “Man, they don't care about that stuff. They care about our connection. No one was ever inspired by a teacher's decorating skills.”

The participants believed that students who experienced the school shooting tend to have a stronger bond with the teachers who were there that day. In 2 years, the students who were present on the day of the shooting will be gone. Juana said, “You have to ensure that you do not create an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality between those who have experienced the shooting and those who did not.” Blair quipped, “No relationship, no learning.”

### Sub Question 1

How do teachers describe the process of building student-teacher relationships in their classrooms? The participants' perspectives are that there is no standard way to build and nurture a student-teacher relationship. Stephanie said, "There is no written word on the formula for a student-teacher relationship." The word *connect* was a frequent descriptor in the interviews and focus groups. Blair stated in her interview, "You have to find what works with each student. No two approaches are the same." The participants' consensus on establishing the relationship connection is that the class itself or a common interest is the starting point. Timmy stated in his interview, "I may get a kid I have absolutely nothing in common with that I can establish a connection through art."

The participants believed that they must be real with students to build relationships with them. Nannette expressed in her interview,

My classroom is not just running on books and things like that. I always tried to build a rapport with them, so I'm just talking about their everyday life and what's going on at home. You know, talking with them like I was a real human being and not creating an authoritarian mentality about the classroom.

It was noted during Carmella's classroom observation that she had family pictures placed throughout the room. Carmella expressed in her interview,

I want us to be a family. I put these pictures of my kids, nephews, and nieces around the room to show we are a family. One day I was teaching, and my daughter texted to say Eddie Van Halen died. I was in shock. I mean, I grew up with him. For some reason, I got teary-eyed. My students were immediately concerned for me and started talking to me in

a calming manner. It was silly, I guess, but they cared about me. That's a strong student-teacher, family-like relationship.

Naomi, in her interview, quipped, "Trust, they need to know that they can trust you and they need to trust that you have their best interests at heart and that whatever happens, they know that you're going to make the best decision for them." Bill said in his interview,

I learned a long time ago that the kids don't really care what you know till they know that you care and so just spending that first week kind of getting to know the kids. In athletics, I have a huge advantage because I have those kids, most of them, you know, before school ever starts, so you're starting to build those relationships.

In Johnny's classroom, he would compliment a student by telling them the progress they made over the year and how he believed the student was worth investing in. Mandy's observation revealed that students could come to the library to talk and sit on the sofas to relax. The students felt comfortable around her. Johnny said in his interview, "Being available. Developing trust. Students having a sense of that you have a genuine interest in their learning and development."

### **Sub Question 2**

How do teachers describe the effects a school shooting had on their student-teacher relationships? The participants' perspective on the effects of the school shooting on their relationships was that it had no adverse effect on the relationship bond between them. The participants believed that the school shooting made their bonds with their students stronger than before the shooting. Bill stated in his interview, "The students looked to us after the shooting. They lost faith in the administration." Johnny expressed in his interview, "They knew that we were always there for them." The consensus among the participants was that the students lost faith in the school, but not their teachers. The students looked for their teachers to support them

through the time of healing. The student-teacher relationships grew stronger between those that experienced the shooting. Nannette stated in her interview,

Several of them were very scared to come back, and they were not going back to the cafeteria. I don't know if it was just the room itself or the confinement of the cafeteria that made them nervous, but a lot of them had trouble with that in the classrooms. Any time the announcements came on, they jumped through their skin because they were just scared of something else. They leaned on that connection we had with them. They trusted us. We were their family. We became stronger because of it.

During both focus groups, the participants discussed the effect the shooting had on their relationship with their students. Carmella expressed in the first focus group:

I always wanted to be real with my students. It was hard for students to empathize sometimes. I think that sometimes just hearing someone be real from somebody that they've grown to respect and it makes a difference in their lives a little bit because I think that most of them fall into the category of thought that it will never happen here, just like we did until it did. I see the students caring more for each other since then. I see them caring about me, and I definitely care more about them.

Juana expressed in the first focus group,

I had two students in my classroom one morning, and I never had students in my classroom in the morning, and they had come by that day, and said Miss, it's so loud in the cafeteria. Can we sit in here? To me, that's where the relationship changed, they wanted to be near us more. Especially when they were stressed, those connections allowed them to know it was safe to come here. I used to have *me* time, and the students



knew to stay away. Now it's *us* time, and we spend those few minutes before and after school and during lunch together.

Anna expressed in the second focus group,

It affected the way I view my students' mental health. I mean, I cared about them before and wanted them to open up to me, but you know, there wasn't that deep push about what was going on inside their head. I am very much more in tune to what is going on right now. The shooting has made us all closer. I am more conscientious of their mental health. I just care about them more, and they know it. They can see it. Kids aren't dumb. They know.

Johnny stated in his interview, "Well after it happened, I wondered what going forward would look like. I tried to give them space, but they didn't want it. We all became closer." Maria said in her interview, "They [the students] wanted to be around us more. This made us closer to each other, and our bonds grew. Even the ones who graduated communicate with me more than the students that weren't here." Timmy expressed in his interview, "It's just hard to explain. There is a factor there that you can't see or touch, but you know it's there. We are closer than family now."

### **Sub Question 3**

How do teachers sustain student-teacher relationships after a school shooting? The consensus among the participants was that since their bonds with their students were strong, they did not change the way they connected with the students who experienced the shooting. Naomi said, "We are a family, and the family sticks together through the good and the bad."

Furthermore, the participants believed that the way to sustain student-teacher relationships was to create a strong bond that would not rupture in a time of crisis. Maria said in her interview,

Now we have a different dynamic in the classroom. You have students who have been through the shooting and students who have not. Even though you feel a closer bond with the students who experienced the shooting with you, you have to build and sustain a bond with those who weren't there. You need to form a bond that will not rupture during a crisis. They are going to need those bonds one day.

The consensus among the participants was that events test but do not damage the relationships between them and their students. Nannette expressed in her interview, I just keep being real with them. The best communication I have with them is their journals. They express themselves on paper, and I read it and comment on their entries. They know there are no right or wrong entries. It is their feelings. It's a connection we have that sustains our student-teacher bond.

Anna expressed in her interview,

It's a little easier to sustain the student-teacher relationships now. Before, it was all hypothetical, and now you've been through hell, and you want to prepare your students for a potential trip through emotional hell. We do all our learning together. We learn as a team. My students know that I mix the groups to ensure their relationships with their peers branch out, and in the meantime, they get to know me better.

In Blair's first classroom observation, there were strong relationships between her and her students. The students were dissecting rats. When a student or group felt ill or was scared to dissect their rat, Blair would move nearer the student. Blair's proximity encouraged the student to continue with the assignment.

Nannette said in her interview,

You pretty much do the same thing you've always done. You just have to remember that now you have a new dynamic. When all the students who experienced that day are gone, you still have to connect to your students. That dynamic still exists because it happened here. I stay more in tune to their feelings than I have before, and that will not change. I know the importance of it and have experienced it.

Naomi said in her interview,

Before, you got to know their likes and dislikes. You got to know their families and went to their extracurricular stuff. You created a family-like atmosphere, and that was enough to sustain those student-teacher relationships. That doesn't work anymore. The students want these deep conversations that probably a counseling session could handle. They do not want a counselor, though. They want us. You have to make more time for your students. That is the key to sustaining these relationships after the shooting.

In Bill's classroom observation, a student stopped by to ask him a personal question. Bill was not the student's current teacher, but the student felt he could still approach Bill to answer. Johnny, in his interview, stated, "You have to bring it to that next level of care. Before, I could be the caring coach, and now I am the counseling coach. The students expect more from us to maintain a healthy connection with them,

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the results of the study and the answers given to the research questions. Included in the chapter was a description of each participant. The data analysis of the personal interviews and focus group transcriptions plus the classroom observation protocols were used to identify codes to develop categories. Using macros to search for commonalities in the transcripts and observation protocols, three major themes emerged from the data.

The themes were consistent with the current literature regarding student-teacher relationships, which assisted in providing answers to the research questions. One outlier was discovered in the data collection that did not align with a specific research question or theme. The final part of the chapter included responses to the central research question and three sub-questions. Narrative responses and quotations from the participants were added to the relevant predominant themes.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. The research was conducted at a rural seventh through 12th-grade school in the south-central United States. Chapter 5 consists of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

### **Discussion**

The section includes a discussion of the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and empirical literature. Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory which operated on the premise that people form attachments to a primary caregiver to interact in their environment freely, supported the current study. Bowlby's attachment theory and student-teacher relationships are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The themes developed during the data analysis were used to interpret the findings. The findings in the data correlated with current literature regarding student-teacher relationships. Scales et al.'s (2020) research deduced that healthy student-teacher relationships were vital to students' performance. Furthermore, poor mental health may impede a student's academic progress (McNeely et al., 2020; Webber & Mascari, 2018).

### *Summary of Thematic Findings*

Macros were used to organize the data and to identify codes. Codes were segregated by commonality and frequency to identify themes. The themes developed in the data were *interrelated*, *connected*, and *protector*. The connected theme developed into the sub-themes of connection with students who experienced the shooting and connection with students who did not experience the shooting. The protector theme developed into the sub-themes of emotional and physical protector.

**Medium for Connection.** The participants believed there must be an initial connection to building relationships with students. The initial connection correlates to the interrelated theme in that it is the base by which the teacher builds the relationship. The commonality can be a common interest or the content of the class itself. The connection allows for trust to be fostered and an attachment made between the student and teacher. Bowlby (1982) theorized that no two people would act the same in a given situation. Finding that connection is the first step in identifying a student as a learner and a person (Espelage et al., 2015; Hawkes & Twemlow, 2015; Weisbrot, 2008). When prompted to explain in more detail about her beginning of the year survey during the first focus group, Carmella said,

I want to know more than their likes and dislikes; I want to know the sounds and smells they enjoy and despise. It is amazing that when a student comes through the door for the first time, you think you have them pegged, and they surprise you. You may have the rough and tough student who likes to arrange flowers or the spoiled preppy rich kid who is into goth metal.

Mandy said during the first focus group,

Carmella is right. You cannot stereotype. You have to find out what it is they are

connected to and use that as a base to build a relationship. I've had some kids that didn't even know they loved to read. It was never encouraged with them. I used reading as a way to connect with the students.

Blair stated in her interview, "Sometimes it is difficult to find that connection, but it's out there if you search hard enough."

### **Healthy Student-Teacher Relationships Are Vital to Student Mental Health.**

Throughout the data collection phase of the case study, it was observed that the high school operated more like a family unit than an academic institution. It was evident that teachers were involved in the day-to-day lives of the students. The participants used the term *family* frequently during the interviews. It was noted during Carmella's classroom observation that she had pictures of her family around the classroom. During her classroom observation, it was observed that Juana had *ofrendas* of her parents from a Day of the Dead project. Ofrendas are small altars that honor the deceased. Her students also had ofrendas on display. When asked about the ofrendas during her interview, Juana said, "It's a way for all of us to be a big family. We remember our loved ones together." Healthy relationships are good for the students' mental health (Shiple et al., 2018).

Healthy student-teacher relationships are like parent-child relationships in that the student sees their teacher in a paternal or maternal sense (Sandwick et al., 2019). Healthy student-teacher relationships are a critical developmental asset for adolescents and are found throughout the literature (Chandrasegaran & P., 2018; Pekel et al., 2018; Scales et al., 2020; Yazdi et al., 2019). The data from the current study confirmed this notion. Blair said in her interview, "There is no learning going on until these kids get to know me." In the second focus group, Anna said, "If these kids are not with it mentally, they just don't learn." Nannette stated in her interview, "If we

are not giving them some emotional stability, then where will they get it from. Most of these kids are from broken homes, and this is the only normalcy they get in a day.”

### **Strong Emotional Bonds Aided in Emotional Recovery After the School Shooting.**

The participants believed that the emotional bonds established with their students and teachers at the study site aided in the emotional recovery of the students. Most of the participants used different media for students to express themselves. The participants reminded the students how their interests were interrelated. Timmy said in his interview,

We are an art class, and they can always express themselves through art. Some of their expressions were eye-opening, but they knew they could be honest with me. As time grew in between us and the event, their art became more joyful. They used brighter colors. Students who are not allowed to operate freely in their emotions would not paint like this. In the days following the shooting, teachers used the time to allow students to express their concerns free from judgment.

Timmy’s statement demonstrated how students felt safe around him. Timmy’s statement also demonstrated that he established himself as their protector. During Timmy’s classroom observation, it was noted that his students felt safe around him. Carmella stated in her interview, “It’s an unknown thing. You can’t physically show it, but I am there to protect them; they know I don’t want anything bad to happen to them.”

The consensus among the participants was that academics were secondary at the time. Students were hurting and wanted to know someone cared. The participants agreed that it was because of the trust established with their students that they could have an open and honest conversation about the previous events. Blair stated in her interview, “That first week, we wrote our feelings, drew our feelings, and cried about our feelings.” In the second focus group, Anna



stated, “You could tell the students who had those strong ties with their teachers. They bounced back quick. They knew someone cared about them.”

Most participants in the study had students who viewed them as their safe persons. During times of heightened stress, the student would go to their safe person to calm down. Most participants believed that being in the students’ presence for a short while would lower the student’s anxiety and stress levels. During Juana’s classroom observation, a student who was upset came in and sat down at Juana’s desk. She got a tissue and began taking deep breathes until she was calm. Once the student calmed herself, she went back to her class. When asked about this incident during her interview, Juana said, “She knows I’m there for her, and she feels safe in here. She knows she can sit in here when she’s upset. I do not ask any questions unless she wants to talk. It usually lasts a few minutes, and then she goes back to class. Bowlby (1982) theorized in his attachment component of proximity maintenance that when a person is experiencing elevated stress levels, they will search for their secure base. Once the person is in the proximity of their secure base, they can self-regulate their emotions to decrease their stress (Bowlby, 1982; Kim & Cho, 2017; Mota & Matos, 2015).

**Bowlby’s (1982) Attachment Theory Is Key to Understanding Student-Teacher Relationships After a School Shooting.** The attachment theory’s four components are a safe haven, secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress (Bowlby, 1982; Bowlby, 1988; Diamond, 2014; Kim & Cho, 2017). When asked a follow-up question about safe haven in the first group, Anna said, “I don’t use that term, but I can see it happening in the classroom, especially if my student has a bad home life. They want that safe place.” Timmy said in his interview, “I try my best to communicate that in this room they are safe emotionally and physically.” During her classroom observation, Blair had her room painted in pastel colors, and

the room only used dimmed ambient lights. When asked about it during her interview, she said, “It puts them emotionally at ease.”

Bowlby (1982) theorized that once a person viewed a caregiver as a safe haven, they would attach themselves emotionally to that person. During her interview, Nannette said, “You can tell when they feel safe around you. They begin to trust you and open up. You can even see an improvement in their work. Maria’s classroom observation revealed that the students in her class worked well together and stayed on task most of the class. When asked about this during her interview, Maria said,

It doesn’t start like that. It’s hard at first. I have the special education kids. Most of them do not want to be there anyway. They have that mentality that the sped kids are the dumb kids. As the year progresses on they [the students] get over that and begin to bond in the classroom. Once their bond with me is established, you see a change in the attitude and learning.

The participants believed that their students felt safe when in the proximity of their teachers. Students who experienced the school shooting relied on their teacher’s presence to reduce stress in times of emotional need. The participants felt an obligation to protect their students physically and emotionally. Bill stated in his interview, “They know I’m there, and I will protect them.” Bowlby (1982) theorized that when a person was near their secure base, they could interact in their environment with reduced stress levels. Mandy, in the first focus group, said, “They know me, and they know when they’re with me, they’re safe. Sometimes they come looking for me in the building when they are stressed.” Juana stated in her interview, “They come in and need to calm down. It’s that chair and that tissue box. They’ll be fine in a minute. They just need to feel emotionally safe.” Timmy said in his interview, “I have students who act

differently with me because they feel safer in my classroom.” During Johnny’s third classroom observation, a few of his students came to class anxious. Once Johnny came in and exchanged greetings with them, they appeared calm and began their work.

Separation distress is when a person has heightened anxiety in the absence of their secure base (Bowlby, 1982). Bowlby (1982) theorized that a person’s ability to function in the absence of their secure base was reduced. Separation distress was challenging to observe during classroom observations since the observations were of the participants. There were some instances where the participant needed to leave their classroom. During Blair’s third observation, she had to get some copies she forgot. Another teacher stood at the door to watch the class while it happened. It was observed that the students’ attitudes changed in the 3 minutes she was absent from the class. The students became distracted and kept looking at the door for Blair to return. Anna said in her interview, “They act differently when we are not there. I try not to give them work that is too difficult when I am gone. They just cannot focus.” Nanette said in her interview, “It’s funny, they think it’s going to be great when you’re gone, and they hug me and say they missed me when I return.”

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

Implications for policy and practice resulted from this study. A review of the findings suggested that the participants understood the importance of building solid relationships with their students. The participants believed that the relationships they formed with their students before the school shooting was vital in reducing stress and encouraging emotional recovery after the event.

### ***Implications for Policy***

The analysis of the findings suggested that student-teacher relationships cannot be mandated through policy. Student-teacher relationships are established by fostering trust between the teachers and their students. Further analysis of findings revealed that it might be in the district's best interest to facilitate time within the school day to allow for student-teacher relationships. From the data presented, one can espouse that policies to increase morale among the teachers may also be crucial to facilitating student-teacher relationships. It may be deduced from the data that when students see happy teachers trusting each other, it may encourage them to build relationships with their teachers.

Also, the data further revealed that it might benefit the district to invest more mental health resources in teachers and students. It was discovered in the data that opportunities to seek mental health resources might also foster morale-boosting and allow for student-teacher relationship focus. It may be deduced from the data that if the teachers and students knew efforts were being made to influence their mental health, the students and teachers might also focus on each other as individuals and not just teachers and learners. Naomi said in her interview, "We need the district to get serious about the mental health of the kids. These kiddos just need someone to love on them. They get enough pressure during the year." Mandy said in the first focus group. "Students need a time to decompress, and that does not happen. They need a brain break. Something for their mind to relax."

### ***Implications for Practice***

Practical implications resulted from this case study. The findings revealed that the participants see and understand the importance of building and maintaining student-teacher relationships. The participants agreed that a lack of time during the day for student-teacher

relationship building could hinder the development of student-teacher relationships. Juana said in the focus group,

We just do not have any time during the day to enjoy the students' presence. I know it seems odd to have some hangout time during the day, but they need it, and they need it bad. Sometimes they are so mentally spent they walk around like zombies. You cannot tell me that's good for these kiddos.

Having time for morale among the students and teachers was a primary concern for the participants. The participants believed that the district lacked morale resources to foster peer and teacher relationship building at the study site. Stephanie stated in her interview, "When the new administration came in, they didn't care about morale. Morale was down among the teachers and students. No one trusted anyone. You could see the stress levels peak." The participants believed that when the new administration, unfamiliar with the school shooting, came to the district, they neglected morale measures. Students who experienced the phenomenon that day created an "us" and "them" attitude toward those who were not present that day. Maria said in her interview, "The students huddled to each other and stayed on the defensive. They did not trust the new administration, so they banded together."

Teachers must build strong relationships with their students in their classrooms. From the data presented, one can extrapolate that when there are strong student-teacher relationships, students may be more motivated to learn. The students need to feel comfortable with the teacher and understand that their teacher sees them as individuals and not just learners. The data revealed that teachers want to build a family-like atmosphere in their classrooms where students feel comfortable to be themselves; however, time is a constraining factor with the added pressure of teaching the curriculum and students' performance on state-mandated standardized testing. The

participants believed that time should be allotted during the week to build trust and strengthen relationships between students and teachers. School districts should consider having resources that foster student-teacher relationships. The participants believed the bonds they had with their students helped them through the school shooting tragedy. The data revealed that the district used many resources to assist the students in recovery. However, the students preferred their teachers to help manage the stresses of the event.

Activities that promote student-teacher relationships may allow for the student and teacher to have ownership in the process. The participants believed that there is no standardized way to build a relationship with their students. Each person is unique, and time should be made to build trust to nurture a student-teacher bond. The participants revealed that teachers who can establish strong emotional bonds with their students could create a safe learning environment where students will have a more positive academic outcome. The participants believed time, rather than curriculum, encourages student-teacher relationships. Timmy stated in the second focus group, “Every teacher must figure out what works for them to connect with their students. You either got it, or you don’t.” Anna said in her interview, “I can tell when students are happy. When they are happy, they are better learners.”

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

The results of this study had theoretical and empirical implications. The theory used for the current study was Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory. Based on these implications, recommendations to the stakeholders were made.

#### ***Theoretical Implications***

The theory guiding this case study was Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory. This case study focused on student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting

at a rural south-central United States school. The findings suggested that the school shooting event had a minimal negative effect on strong student-teacher relationships. All 12 participants agreed that the bonds established with their students were vital in the emotional recovery after the shooting. Johnny said in his interview, “I couldn’t tell any negative effect on our connection. They wanted to be by me more than ever.” Mandy in the focus group quipped, “They wanted to be around us more than ever. The relationship was a positive outcome of a negative event.”

The participants further agreed that students do not seek trust and acceptance with their administrators or other stakeholders in positions of power at the district. The participants believed that their bonds with the students were essential to gaining trust, minimizing stress levels, and establishing a safe learning environment. Johnny stated in his interview, “They are not doing anything for you until they know you.” Carmella said in the first focus group. “They just have to trust you, and that trust goes from board to teacher. We are all stakeholders.”

Approaching this case study from a relationship perspective revealed how student-teacher relationships were affected after a school shooting—using the relationship approach allowed for the study of the complexity of student-teacher relationships. A study of the literature revealed that there are no common causes for a school shooting. Current literature revealed that adolescents who experienced physical and emotional trauma benefitted from attachment-type therapies (Diamond, 2014). The data revealed that the four components of Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory of safe haven, secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress existed within the student-teacher relationships at the study site.

The case study participants believed in establishing strong student-teacher relationships that would benefit the student and teacher in times of high stress. Maria stated in her interview, “My students I connect with more seem to do better in busy times like state testing or end of

semester exams.” Even though the participants believed that healthy student relationships could not be mandated through fiat, they believed that the district could be proactive in allowing student-teacher bonds to flourish by allowing time throughout the school day for morale building. Nannette said in her interview, “They need to focus on the long-term. We need time to connect with these students. Teaching isn’t the cure-all for learning.”

The results of this case study supported Bowlby’s (1982) attachment theory. The study participants indicated that they establish a safe learning environment through student-teacher relationships. Within the confines of the classroom, the students operated at reduced stress levels when in their teacher’s presence and demonstrated increased stress and anxiety levels in the teacher’s absence. The participants communicated that their students who experienced the school shooting demonstrated higher stress levels in the teacher’s absence, even 2 years after the shooting.

### ***Empirical Implications***

Existing research indicates that adolescents with strong, healthy attachments operate at reduced stress levels and can self-regulate anxiety during high-stress times (Bowlby, 1982). The adolescent uses the relational bond established with a primary caregiver as a sense of comfort while interacting in society (Kim et al., 2018). An analysis of the data from this present study found that teachers who established healthy attachments with their students saw more motivation and a willingness to learn. The participants agreed that students who saw their teacher as a primary caregiver were willing to complete assigned tasks because of the teacher and not for the teacher. School administration must facilitate the establishment and nurturing of healthy student-teacher relationships.



The emergence of the protector may interest readers of this research. The participants felt a need to protect their students physically and emotionally. The participants communicated in their interviews that while they would protect any student, they felt more obliged to protect those who shared the tragedy. Further case studies at similar sites may bring more data to the field.

The current study revealed that healthy student-teacher relationships could benefit student academic achievement. Participants agreed that teachers must have the ability and willingness to build relationships with their students. Mandy stated bluntly, “If they [the teacher] are here to just collect a paycheck or riding out to retirement, they have no business being an educator and should move on.” Teachers who build healthy relationships create a family-like atmosphere and a sense of belonging for their students (Ancess et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2019; Turley & Graham, 2019). Carmella said, “We are a family, and families will always be there for each other.”

There is a lack of empirical research that relates explicitly to exploring student-teacher relationships and school shootings. The current literature focus is on school violence prevention, which incorporates the school shooting phenomenon. The current study diverges from the previous research in that it explores student-teacher relationships after a school shooting. By diverging from previous research, the current study espoused the need for further research on school shootings and student-teacher relationships. Stakeholders are urged to create a plan that will facilitate healthy student-teacher relationships.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The current study was delimited to certified public school teachers employed and present on the day of the study site’s school shooting. Other employees present at the study site on the day of the shooting were excluded from the study. The rationale for the delimitation was that

teachers would have more of an established relationship with their students due to student-teacher interactions on a day-to-day basis.

The first limitation of the study was researcher bias. I had experienced the same school shooting event at the study site, and I am currently still employed at the study site. Furthermore, I was the one who confronted the shooter and was the first to administer first aid to the victim. Additionally, the study only examined the student-teacher relationships of those who have experienced a school shooting which means the results may not translate for a broader audience. Another study of student-teacher relationships where a school shooting did not occur may have a different outcome. The present study relied on participants self-reporting their experiences. It is possible that the participants did not describe their experiences accurately, in order to please me since I am their colleague and was present the day of the shooting. Also, they may have answered in particular ways to please the focus group members.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study explored student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a south-central United States school. The study results indicated that a school shooting event had minimal adverse effects on healthy student-teacher relationships. The current study's participants established and maintained healthy relationships with their students before the shooting event. A multiple case study design could be utilized to explore student-teacher relationships after a school shooting across several sites. There may be gaps between student-teacher relationships and school shootings that need to be explored.

Future studies could also examine difficulties teachers may experience building relationships with students who are from single-parent homes. Bowlby (1982) argued that adolescents who had no established healthy maternal and paternal attachments demonstrate

difficulty trusting others since a person's first attachment is the foundation of all future attachments. This type of study could be completed over multiple sites with multiple demographics represented.

There are increased demands on student performance through standardized learning through standardized nationwide curriculum. Standardized curriculum and testing seem to focus more on the student as a learner and not a person. A study could examine what districts allow time for student-teacher relationships to flourish and if those relationships facilitate better student performance. This type of study could be completed with a mixed-methods approach that examines the quantitative data for student performance related to qualitative measures that explore student-teacher relationships.

Since the Columbine school shooting, stakeholders have focused on school violence prevention through Zero Tolerance policies and the hardening of schools. A study could be done comparing the instances of school violence in Zero Tolerance districts and in districts that focus on relationship building to prevent violence. This type of study could expand on Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory to determine if students feel safe and perform better at a campus that resembles a safe haven or when students deem the presence of their teachers a safe haven.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to explore student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural south-central United States school. Using Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, the current study explored the effects a school shooting had on student-teacher relationships. Data were collected from 12 participants through personal interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. The data were analyzed and coded, and themes were developed. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the data:

interrelated, connected, and protector. The protector theme developed into the sub-themes of physical protector and emotional protector. The main finding of the current study was that the school shooting had a minimal negative effect on student-teacher relationships.

The participants believed that their bonds with the students were essential to gaining trust, minimizing stress levels, and establishing a safe learning environment. Stakeholders must understand the importance of healthy student-teacher relationships on their campus. Furthermore, time must be allotted for the development of healthy student-teacher relationships. By negating the relational aspect of learning, stakeholders are in danger of only seeing the student as a learner and denying their humanity as a person.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: IRB Approval

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 26, 2021

Lee Guidry  
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-751 A Case Study Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships Two Years Later in the Aftermath of a Shooting at in a Rural South-Central United States School

Dear Lee Guidry, Gail Collins:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

## Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how teachers describe their experiences regarding student-teacher relationships 2 years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural South-Central United States school and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join this study.


Participants must be 18 years of age or older and were employed as a certified teacher at Italy High School and present on campus on January 22, 2018. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a personal interview, a focus group, and three classroom observations. You will have the opportunity to complete a review of your interview transcript and the transcript of your part of the focus group to ensure their accuracy and to edit them if needed. It should take approximately one hour to complete the interview and focus group. The classroom observations will last for the length of your class period. Your participation will be completely confidential.

If you wish to participate, please click the link below to complete a screening survey. After reviewing your completed screening survey, you will receive an email notification stating whether you are selected for the study. As a participant, the email will contain a link to a consent document for you to complete. The consent document contains additional information about this research. Click the following link for the screening survey: [Screening Survey Link](#)

Sincerely,

Lee J. Guidry Jr., MA

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University



**Appendix C: Screening Survey**

1. Are you a certified public-school teacher?

Yes

No

2. Were you employed at Italy High School on January 22, 2018?

Yes

No

3. Were you on campus on January 22, 2018?

Yes

No

4. Are you willing to participate in the study: Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships 2  
Years Later in the Aftermath of a School Shooting at a Rural South-Central United States  
School?

Yes

No

5. What are your preferred days for the interview and focus group?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

6. What are your preferred times for the interview and focus group?

4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Other proposed time

7. What email address do you prefer to use for our communication during this study?

## **Appendix D: Acceptance and Rejection Letter to Potential Participants**

### **Acceptance Letter**

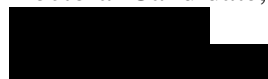
Dear Teacher,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the case study titled: Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships 2 Years Later in the Aftermath of a School Shooting at a Rural South-Central United States School. You have been selected to participate in this study. The link for the electronic consent form is found at the bottom of this email. Please complete the consent form within seven days. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by the phone number or email listed below.

Click the following link to access the electronic consent form: [Consent Form Link](#)

Sincerely,

Lee J. Guidry Jr., MA  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University



### **Rejection Letter**

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the case study titled: Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships 2 Years Later in the Aftermath of a School Shooting at a Rural South-Central United States School. Regretfully, you have not been selected to participate in this study. If you have questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by the phone number or email listed below.

Sincerely,

Lee J. Guidry Jr., MA  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University





## Appendix E: Consent Form

### Consent

**Title of the Project:** A Case Study Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships Two Years Later in the Aftermath of a Shooting at a Rural South-Central United States School  
**Principal Investigator:** Lee J. Guidry, Jr., MA, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have been a certified full-time teacher employed and present at [REDACTED]

#### What is the study about, and why is it being done?

The purpose of this qualitative single instrumental case study is to explore student-teacher relationships two years later in the aftermath of a school shooting at a rural South-Central United States school. Specifically, the goal of this study will be to examine the factors and experiences ~~that influenced teachers' perceptions of the effects a school shooting had on their relationships~~ with students.

#### What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in a personal interview. The interview will be audio-recorded, and you will be provided with a transcription of the interview. You will have the opportunity to make suggestions for corrections of the transcription. The interview will take approximately one hour.
2. Participate in a focus group. The focus group will be audio-recorded, and you will be provided with a transcription of the focus group. You will have the opportunity to make suggestions for corrections of the transcription. The focus group will take approximately one hour.
3. Allow your classroom to be observed three separate times. The classroom observations will allow the researcher to collect data on student-teacher relationships in your classroom. Each observation will last one class period. The classroom observations will allow the researcher to collect data on student-teacher relationships in your classroom. No specific data or information about students will be documented.
4. Complete a review of your interview transcript and the transcript of your part of the focus group to ensure their accuracy and to edit them if needed. Each transcript review will take approximately 30 minutes.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. You may benefit from [REDACTED] participation with other teachers who were also present at [REDACTED]. The study will allow teachers to lend their voices for recommendations regarding holistic approaches to school violence prevention.

#### What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Liberty University  
 IRB-FY20-21-751  
 Approved on 4-29-2021

#### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews/focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

#### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Italy Independent School District. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

#### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lee J. Guidry, Jr. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Gail Collins, at [REDACTED].

#### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, [REDACTED].

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

Liberty University  
IRB-FY20-21-751  
Approved on 4-28-2021

## Appendix F: Interview Questions

*Exploring Student-Teacher Relationships 2 Years Later in the Aftermath of a School Shooting at a Rural South-Central United States School.*

1. Why did you choose teaching as your career?
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. Describe your philosophy on maintaining healthy relationships at work.
4. What process do you use to build healthy student-teacher relationships?
5. Looking back at your previous answer, what do you feel are the critical aspects of building healthy student-teacher relationships?
6. Describe to me your typical day of teaching.
7. Describe your day of teaching on the day of the school shooting.
8. What were your immediate concerns for your students that day?
9. Describe your relationships with students before the shooting.
10. What were the immediate effects the school shooting had on your relationships with your students?
11. How have your relationships with students changed since the shooting?
12. What do you do to foster relationships with your students?
13. What challenges have you faced with maintaining relationships with your students that experienced the school shooting?
14. How do your students know that they are secure physically and emotionally in your classroom?
15. How do your students know that you care about them?

16. Describe some specific things you do to foster an atmosphere of care in your classroom.
17. Why would a student feel safe, both emotionally and physically, in your classroom?
18. Please share anything else you feel brings a better understanding of student-teacher relationships in the aftermath of a school shooting.

### **Appendix G: Focus Group**

1. Please introduce yourself to the group.
2. Describe your role in fostering student-teacher relationships in your classroom.
3. How have your student-teacher relationships in your classroom changed since the school shooting?
4. Describe how you have modeled that your classroom is a safe haven.
5. What is your overall feeling of being able to have positive student-teacher relationships while dealing with the emotional trauma created by a school shooting?
6. What would you like to see more regarding student-teacher relationships on your campus?
7. How has district policy affected your ability to foster student-teacher relationships on campus?
8. What types of policies can the district enact to facilitate healthy student-teacher relationships?
9. What would the group like to add to this interview as a recommendation for other teachers regarding student-teacher relationships?



### Appendix I: Reflexive Journal

Date	Entry
11/15/2020	<p>I am a teacher at the research site and was employed and present at the site on the day of the school shooting. This is a day that is permanently etched in my memory. I can still see the victim's blood on my clothes that I had to wear that entire day since I was a witness and had to be interviewed. I could not even go home to wash and get clean clothes. Everything happened so fast I did not have time to express feelings in the moment. The shooter and the victim were both my students, and I had built a relationship with them when they were my students. I remember the shooter the first day he was in my classroom four years before the incident. I remember thinking that this kid needed someone to show him kindness. I made it a point to say something positive to that student every day and show him that I cared about his day-to-day life. I was in counseling the day after the shooting. I told the whole story to the counselor. I was still numb from the incident, but she told me something that I have never forgotten. She told me when I was standing face-to-face to the shooter, trying to talk him away from the victim, he remembered that I was someone who always showed him kindness. I became the memory he needed at that moment, and instead of causing more harm to the victim or pulling the trigger at me, he chose to flee. The student-teacher relationship I built over the years saved me and others from harm.</p> <p>Taking on a research path with such emotional attachment, I must be cognizant of my biases while dealing with this phenomenon. Part of doing this is recognizing that research should add to the field. If I am biased with my findings or manipulate the data to fit my preconceived ideas, I am doing a disservice to the academic community. I have established a group of peers that can objectively look at the data to ensure that my connection to the event does not skew the findings. A mentor and a colleague have agreed to allow me to talk through the data and monitor for bias. Also, I will keep good notes in this journal to reflect on the progress and look for bias.</p>
05/13/21	<p>Today was the first focus group. Having a group of colleagues with whom I experienced the same tragedy and staying objective proved to be difficult. Emotions were high among the participants, and pauses in the interview were taken to ensure the reflection of the incident did not overstress the participants. I believe I maintained objectivity in the interview.</p>
05/24/21	<p>Today was the second focus group; though emotions were high as in the first one, I felt I could maintain objectivity more easily. I believe this was due to having gone through the first focus groups and anticipating the emotionalism associated with reflecting on a tragedy.</p>
06/18/21	<p>Reflecting on this case study, I feel that even though I experienced the event and saw my colleagues and students suffer emotional trauma afterward, I was able to maintain objectivity. I believe the main reason for this is that there was enough time passed for my emotional healing. I do not regret taking on the study. I</p>



	believe it was important enough to risk reliving the emotional trauma from that day to allow colleagues to give their voices.
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### Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Entry
<b>04/23/21</b>	Received full IRB approval.
<b>04/26/21- 04/27/21</b>	Solicited pilot study participants.
<b>04/28/21- 04/30/21</b>	Conducted a pilot study and utilized the results for the main study.
<b>05/02/21- 05/03/21</b>	Solicited study participants.
<b>05/04/21</b>	Sent acceptance letters and consent forms to participants—sent rejection letters to participant applicants who did not qualify for the study.
<b>05/06/21- 05/16/21</b>	Conducted classroom observations and personal interviews of participants.
<b>05/13/21</b>	Conducted focus group 1.
<b>05/24/21</b>	Conducted focus group 2.
<b>05/26/21</b>	Uploaded audio recordings to Microsoft Word 365 for transcriptions.
<b>06/01/21</b>	Aggregated data, printed transcripts.
<b>06/05/21- 07/11/21</b>	Completed data analysis and began writing Chapter 4.
<b>07/11/21- 07/17/21</b>	Wrote Chapter 5 and submitted it to the chair for review.