A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY ON MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER APPROACHABILITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF THOSE PERCEPTIONS ON STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTIONS

by

Kathryn Marquette Teston

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to investigate how middle school student perceptions of teacher approachability influenced their interactions with teachers. The fourteen participants were sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade general education middle school students from three school models (public, private, and Christian) in the metro area of a city in the southeastern United States. The Approach-Avoidance Theory, first proposed by Kurt Lewin, (1935) provided the theoretical framework for this study. The central research question that shaped this grounded theory study was: How do general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? The three subquestions investigated whether or not social constructs in school, home environment, and student-teacher relationships had any impact on students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Data collection incorporated an initial single-question screening questionnaire, a demographic questionnaire, individual and focus group interviews, and journaling/blogging. Data analysis included open, axial, and selective coding through transcription of participants’ responses to interview questions. Three major themes emerged through the data analysis: awareness (self- and other-), communication, and relationship, which were all influenced by social constructs in school, home environment, and student-teacher relationships. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations of data collection and analysis were addressed and implemented. Recommendations for future research included: student connectedness to teachers, creating environments that foster approachability, teaching self-advocacy skills to students, and students’ approach-avoidance tendencies according to personality.

Keywords: approachability, self-advocacy, self-awareness, self-efficacy
Dedication

A project of this magnitude is rarely accomplished in isolation and this research study is no exception. There are two special ones to whom I dedicate these six years of work. First of all, without the sustaining grace of Jesus, I would not have endured to the end and completed such an arduous task. He kept me focused on the goal, kept me awake when I was fading (and I think even wrote some parts that I do not remember writing myself), and made every detail of the data collection process come together when it seemed that the window of opportunity was closing. Secondly, my beloved husband of forty-three years, Michael Teston, was my constant encourager and inspiration to stay the course. He continually expressed belief in my ability to finish what I had begun. Time and again he sacrificed his preferences to support my pursuit. He truly loves me as Christ loves the Church. This achievement is our achievement and a true example of oneness. Thank you, my beloved.
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I began this journey the month my son graduated from high school because I knew I would need something to help soften the impact of our empty nest. As an educator, I was committed to lifelong learning and pursuing a doctorate seemed to be the logical next step. With any worthwhile endeavor, a support network of sideline cheerleaders makes everything seem more feasible. I would not have been able to reach this point in my pursuit if not for the consistent encouragement of my three adult children and their spouses, Sara and Evan Morris, Laura and Cliff Welch,
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There is an amazing group of people I call my colleagues and with whom I have the privilege of serving our school together. They have encouraged me, expressed interest in my study, and checked on my progress. Their prayers and words have been invaluable. In particular, I want to thank my fellow sojourner, Joey Morecraft (soon to be Dr. Morecraft) who has provided a sympathetic ear and brilliant mind as we’ve held each other accountable to keep on keeping on. My first administrative assistant, Carol Turner, helped me prepare for each course in the early years and my receptionist, Peggy Yates, protected my time and guarded my door. Thank you both so much. Since becoming the Head of School, my current administrative assistant, Melanie Pager, has been vigilant in relieving as much stress as she could while helping me balance all of my responsibilities. Many of my teaching colleagues have prayed for and encouraged me along the way, including Suzi Harrison who has been one of the most faithful and consistent prayer warriors these six years.

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Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Quotient (EQ)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

During the season of life known as adolescence, students find themselves navigating a seemingly deep ravine between childhood and adulthood, trying to discover their own identity and express their independence while striving for emotional, social, physical, and mental balance at the same time (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Adolescents have moved from a smaller elementary school to a middle school where students converge with classmates from other elementary schools. Adolescent students move from knowing and being known by their teachers to being the proverbial little fish in a big pond. In this transition, adolescents may think they are the only ones who feel they do not belong or experience a sense of inadequacy and lack of normalcy (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Some adolescents’ ease or difficulty in establishing healthy relationships with adults reflects the strength of their relationships with their parents (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Dykas, Woodhouse, Ehrlich, & Cassidy, 2010). The manner in which adolescents resolve conflict at school carries over from the conflict resolution strategies they have learned at home (Branje, Van Doorn, Van der Walk, & Meeus, 2009; Goldwater & Nutt, 1999). If they are confident to approach their parents to discuss different life matters, approaching teachers with school-related matters may follow suit (Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; Kauffman, 2013; Sands, 2011; Ubinger, Handal, & Massura, 2013). Research reveals the need for teachers to create emotionally and socially safe environments for their students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Goldwater & Nutt, 1999; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Additionally, programs that teach self-advocacy strategies to students have experienced a measure of success, particularly for students
who are gifted or challenged with learning differences (Lane-Garon, Yergat, & Kralowec, 2012; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Rajalakshmi, Srividya, & Suresh, 2012; Saha, 2012; Sebag, 2010). Even with the implementation of these initiatives, middle school students still seem to be hesitant or resistant to approach their teachers with questions and concerns, sometimes because of fear (Branje et al., 2009). This grounded theory study investigates how middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence their interactions with teachers.

**Background**

As common as the term is today, before the early 1900s, the word “adolescent” was not a part of Americans’ vocabulary (Sands, 2011). Little people were children, and then they became adults. There was no term assigned to the in-between years. A young person was an apprentice for a trade where skills were gained in order to provide for a family one day. However, there was not a term, or a period of one’s youth, to designate the development and maturity that was taking place. Beginning in the early 1900s, theories of psychology were beginning to emerge and theorists began building an understanding of knowing and learning (Miller, 2011). Such prevalent theories included Bandura’s (1977) social learning, social cognitive, and social modeling theories, Piaget’s (1969) cognitive development theory, Vygotsky’s (1934) social development theory, Skinner’s (1980) operant conditioning theory, and Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. Sands (2011) provides an impressive synthesis of the history of the middle school model in the American educational system. The recognition of developmental challenges of the adolescent provided the underlying philosophy of the middle school model, which was established in the 1960s for the purpose of creating nurturing environments for
adolescents between the elementary and high school years (Sands, 2011). The previous
junior high model was more of a pre-high school than designed with the young
adolescent’s needs in mind. This newer model included small group mentoring with
teachers in order to provide a lifeline for students as they navigated the young adolescent
years. However, even with multiple theories for understanding this developmental phase
and models to address this acquired knowledge, middle school students continue to deal
with their perceptions of teacher approachability. Programs that teach self-determination
and self-advocacy have been created in order to teach students how to speak up for
themselves (Caldwell, 2011; Douglas, 2004). However, generally self-advocacy and self-
determination emphases are developed for students with learning or behavioral
challenges. Self-advocacy programs for general education students are not the normal
context for such initiatives. Professional development for teachers has been implemented
in schools across the nation in order to equip teachers better in meeting the academic,
emotional, and social needs of their students (Durlak et al., 2011; Lane-Garon et al.,
2012). Yet, even with these initiatives and emphases, students still have their perceptions
of teacher approachability that influence interactions with their teachers. The questions
that must be asked address the rationale behind students’ beliefs about approaching their
teachers. Understanding the rationale of students’ perceptions of their teachers’
approachability is the focus of this research study. Greater awareness of today’s middle
school students’ thinking should prompt emphasis in redesigning ineffective programs,
challenge irrelevant thinking, and better equip students to navigate their current and
future relationships (Feldman, Derdikman-Eiron, & Masalha, 2010).
Situation to Self

Through my thirty-six years as an elementary, middle, and high school teacher, K-12 administrator, and mother, and grandmother, I have experienced my own children’s, as well as other students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. When prompted to pursue a conversation with the teacher, a common response proposed that whatever concern the student had could become worse if the teacher was approached. No reasonable explanation was offered; however, the student’s perception or experience prompted the apparently rational response. Such hesitancies became an anomaly from my perspective. From a personal vantage point, why would my own children rather keep their school-related questions to themselves when their mother and two aunts were lifelong educators? After all, I considered us to be rational, friendly, approachable, nurturing educators. Additionally, whenever I was made aware that a student or parent was hesitant to approach my colleagues or me (based on real or perceived issues), my counsel to pursue a conversation was met with resistance, and even a sense of fear. Numerous times, the response alluded to the feeling that the situation or relationship would become worse, and even unrecoverable.

Although my childhood memories recall a peaceful home environment, my husband’s was the opposite. So, when we married forty-three years ago, our expectations for a normal discussion were vastly different. Through the years, we’ve learned to resolve conflict calmly and effectively, but not without exercising many ineffective conflict resolution strategies in the interim. Helping students and adults navigate conflict well, self-advocate, and find their voices has become a consistent pursuit of mine. Because of my eternal optimist perspective, I tend towards believing that most situations
can be resolved and relationships can be mended. This dream can become a reality if students and adults learn to communicate effectively through a lens of preference for one another. With that mindset, along with my compassion for the typical struggles during the adolescent years, I felt compelled to conduct my research study around middle school student perception of teacher approachability. My passion for researching this topic is grounded in my philosophical assumptions and paradigms (Creswell, 2013), which are explained in the sections that follow.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The study’s philosophical assumptions are rooted in an understanding of biblical principles and a biblical worldview. The roles filled or the hats worn do not define one’s identity, as a person, rather it is defined by a personal relationship with Christ as Creator and Savior. People are designed to live in relationship with others and to model those relationships upon biblical principles. As a Christian educator, helping students understand these principles and make decisions based on a biblical worldview provide the impetus for this study. With these assumptions, the belief that biblical principles are applicable and relevant for all cultures, all ages, and at all times sets the foundation moving forward.

**Ontological.** The ontological assumption recognizes the diversity of each person’s reality – and the perception that defines that reality. With all people, middle school students included, having a clear and accurate perception can be challenging, at best. Because people are designed as relational beings, social and emotional factors can skew one’s perception such that decisions are based upon an errant perception. Often, people live life out of the perception of their own realities. Generally, people do not
embrace belief systems they view as errant. People hold onto beliefs that are deemed to be accurate and correct.

**Epistemological.** Knowledge is gathered from many different avenues throughout the course of one’s life. Middle school students gather their knowledge through formal and informal teaching and modeling. Knowledge is also acquired and processed through one’s senses, including observation of others. What students perceive and experience about relationships develops their knowledge base and understanding. Generally, students make relational decisions based upon what they understand about themselves and what they perceive they know about others.

**Alethiological.** Whereas epistemology explains the acquisition of knowledge, alethiology is the study of truth. Knowledge and truth are not synonymous as one might suppose. Knowledge acquired about a subject does not necessarily equate to the veracity of that knowledge. For instance, each worldview embodies a bank of knowledge; however, any worldview outside a biblical worldview does not represent truth. One specific challenge with today’s youth is a lack of discernment between knowledge and truth. Information and perspectives that are relayed through media are too often accepted as truth without the verification of such. Even students reared in Christian homes stray from their biblical roots of belief in exchange for the world’s portrayal of truth. This study will explore the participants’ ability to differentiate between knowledge and truth.

**Rhetorical.** Definitions of terms and concepts will be enmeshed within the context of each phase of the research so as not to predispose the reader towards a certain bias in advance. Effective expressive and receptive communication requires a mutual understanding of terms and concepts to ensure both parties, at least, have that shared
foundation. The noted phenomenon details their stories and perspectives. Therefore, most importantly, the students’ voices will be heard throughout the research study.

**Axiological.** With values rooted in biblical principles and Judeo-Christian ethics, a measure of subjectivity will be revealed in the process of collecting and analyzing the data during this study. As questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and journaling/blogging are coded and analyzed, the researcher’s values will influence the interpretation of the data, however, these values will be bracketed from the data collected and analyzed. Middle school students’ perceptions of their relationships and the actions they take in response to those perceptions will emerge through the data.

**Paradigms**

Overlaying philosophical assumptions are educators’ beliefs about students’ knowledge acquisition and the learning process (Creswell, 2013). Over the course of time, many theorists have conducted research and proposed theories around the teaching and learning processes. These include Piaget’s cognitive stage theory and Vgotsky’s sociocultural theory (Miller, 2011). Based on their own worldviews, educators embrace those theories, which best align with their own beliefs and experiences.

**Interactionist.** By virtue of the fact this qualitative study focuses on middle school students’ relationships with their teachers, an interactionist paradigm is relevant. Students will describe their interactions with their teachers and their reasoning for withholding interaction when that choice is made. The factors that weigh into their reasoning for whether or not to engage their teachers are expected to be multi-faceted. The strength of a teacher/student relationship reflects the nature of their interactions with one another.
Pragmatist. Due to the fact that this study will focus on the practical aspect of middle school student engagement with their teachers, a pragmatic paradigm embodies the goals of the study well. The impetus for this research study is twofold: to acquire more understanding about a perceived issue and to help propose solutions through the voices and stories of the participants. The end goal of this researcher’s study will be the implementation of proposed next steps as identified in the findings. Taking action, based upon acquired knowledge and understanding, is the pragmatist’s motivation for research.

Social constructivist. As students strive to make sense of their world, they regularly evaluate and interpret their perceptions and experiences based upon multiple factors (personality, previous experiences, academic successes and challenges, relational strengths and weaknesses, parenting, and conflict resolution practices, to name a few). This study will collect and analyze data to disseminate the various factors that play into the formation of the students’ perceptions. The researcher recognizes the complexity of the study due to the nature of the issue and the demographics of the participants. However, a measure of insight into the thinking of students around this issue is bound to emerge. The strategies implemented as a result of the findings validate the significance of the research study.

Problem Statement

A far too common response of students, when encouraged to talk to their teachers regarding school-related issues is to respond with an expression of fear or avoidance (Branje et al., 2009). Although many studies have been conducted and programs have been developed around self-advocacy, generally the context is exceptionality – equipping students who are either gifted or have learning differences to find their voices and speak
up about their learning needs (Caldwell, 2011). Even with the affirmation of the inherent value of self-advocacy, students often respond with apprehension and avoidance (Rajalakshmi et al., 2012). Research studies have focused on creating effective programs and equipping teachers to be supportive and accessible for their students, but a gap remains in understanding the factors, from students’ perspectives, that influence their perceptions of teacher approachability. Why do some students find their teachers to be approachable while others avoid talking to their teachers when they have school-related issues to discuss? That question capsulizes the focus of this research study. The problem is an understanding of general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability is missing from the body of research.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to investigate general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and how their perceptions influence interactions with teachers. The number of participants will be ten to fifteen middle school students (or until data saturation is achieved) in three middle school settings (one public, one private, and one Christian) in the metro area of a southeastern city in the United States. Following an initial one-question screening about student perception of teacher approachability, a questionnaire will be given to those students who indicated any negative aspects of teacher approachability. General education students will be selected in order to provide a cross-section of demographics. At this stage in the research, approach-avoidance will be generally defined as the catalyst that sways a student’s perception of teacher approachability (Carver, 2015; Corr & McNaughton, 2012; Diseth & Samdal, 2014 Elliot, 2006; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Middleton, Ciani, Easter,
O-Keefe, & Zusho, 2012; Scholer & Higgins, 2013). The main theories guiding this study are the approach-avoidance conflict theory proposed by Lewin (1935) and the social cognitive theory proposed by Bandura (1989). These theories help explain the reasoning around perceptions of others’ approachability. The approach-avoidance theory and social cognitive theory may help explain the tension created when an adolescent considers addressing a school-related situation with a teacher (Carver, 2015; Corr & McNaughton, 2012; Elliot, 2006; Krieglmeyer, DeHouwer, & Deutsch, 2013; Linnenbrink-Garcia, et al., 2012; Scholer & Higgins, 2013).

**Significance of the Study**

Upon first review, one might think an understanding of middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability has been saturated with research and effective programs have been developed and implemented to address the findings. To a certain degree this is true; however, students’ behaviors continue to reveal a perception of teacher unapproachability. Research proposes teachers need to create safe learning environments for their students in order to be perceived as approachable (Lane-Garon, et al., 2012; LaRusso & Selman, 2011). The middle school model was originally designed to address the needs of middle school students (Sands, 2011). However, current trends reveal a gap between research findings, responses to the findings, and the fact that students continue to perceive their teachers as unapproachable.

Learning and behavioral theories that help explain this apparent phenomenon provide a framework of thought and understanding around students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Explaining social/emotional engagement and attachment in relationships, development of self-perception and self-awareness, approach-avoidance
tendencies, and viewpoints of conflict provide context for this study in the pursuit of understanding students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. The investigation will consider if the four proposed theories provide insight, the research study actually extends further understanding of existing theories, or a grounded theory emerges through the data analysis.

Through triangulation of data collection and analysis, it is anticipated this grounded theory study will provide helpful information that reveals the participants’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Through individual and focus group interviews as well as journaling/blogging, greater understanding of the students’ reasoning should emerge for why specific teachers, or teachers in general, are considered approachable or unapproachable for discussing school-related matters. Perhaps, as the participants think through their own perceptions and experiences with their teachers, they will gain a greater sense of confidence in their abilities to address matters with their teachers, who were previously viewed as unapproachable. Additionally, maybe the participants will be able to encourage their classmates to overcome perceptions of unapproachable teachers.

The researcher is also hopeful the findings of this study will be an encouragement to teachers whose students consider them to be approachable to continue feeding that perception. The significant findings of this study may not impact those teachers who are considered unapproachable by their students simply because the teachers do not even realize they are perceived in this way. Emotional intelligence (EI) or emotional quotient (EQ) measures how well a person recognizes the impact they make on others. The possibility exists that a teacher who is considered to be unapproachable is not cognizant of that perception.
Researchers and educators are compelled to examine the factors that comprise a middle school student’s perception of teacher approachability. Although this study will have certain limitations, the current findings will be representative of the greater middle school population. The original philosophical underpinnings of the middle school model may need to be resurrected and programs around this model considered for reinstatement. Redesigning current middle school teachers’ and students’ school days may be required in order to meet the unique social and emotional needs of these young adolescents. Of particular interest will be newer factors in students’ thinking such as social media, social/emotional dynamics, and the perceived approachability of today’s middle school teachers (Lyles, 2014). Certainly, students need the reassurance that their teachers are emotionally safe people and approachable.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative grounded theory study will address one central research question: How do general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? The research study will consider the students’ perceptions of whether or not their teachers are approachable when there are school-related matters to discuss. Perhaps previous personal experiences influence students’ perceptions of teacher approachability (Karam, 2006; Kauffman, 2013; Wagner-Pacifici & Hall, 2012). The study will consider if a student has had positive or negative interactions with teachers that help to determine whether or not teachers are approachable. In addition, students’ perceptions of others’ experiences may influence their own perceptions as well (Williams, 2013). Three sub questions will help guide the research study:
1. How, if at all, do social constructs in school affect middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability? An effective learning environment, which was focused on adolescents’ needs, was the premise for the middle school versus junior high school model in the 1950s (Board, n.d.; Sands, 2011). The philosophy behind the program design highlighted the value of the middle school model for meeting adolescents’ needs (Bedard & Do, 2005; Dhuey, 2011; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). However, due to lack of follow through in program implementation, larger teacher/student ratios than deemed optimal, and risk management concerns, the positive effect of the middle school model was not fully realized and the students’ perceptions of teacher approachability were developed around busy teachers and packed schedules. Professional development designed to help teachers meet students’ needs are not always geared for the middle school context (Malti & Noam, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Saha, 2012). Simply stated, the middle school environment may validate the perception that teachers are unapproachable when it is really programming and inadequate training that confirm students’ perceptions of their teachers (Karam, 2006; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Sands, 2011). This question explores the role that the school context plays in students’ perceptions of teacher approachability.

2. How, if at all, does home environment affect middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability? Research has shown that students emulate their parents’ strategies in relationship development and conflict resolution. Sometimes strategies are intentionally taught and modeled by
parents. However, children emulate what has been observed more often than what they have been told (Bradford, Vaughn, & Barber, 2007; Feldman et al., 2010; Kiner, 2009). This question explores the students’ lived experiences in their homes and the resulting influence on their perceptions of teacher approachability (Dykas et al., 2010; Garcia-Ruiz, Rodrigo, Hernandez-Cabrera, Maiquez, & Dekovic, 2013; Kiner, 2009).

3. How, if at all, does the student-teacher relationship affect middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability? As the masters of their classrooms, teachers are regarded as the creators of their environments and initiators of relationships with their students (Davis, 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Modeling and enforcing mutual respect is a key ingredient in establishing safety within the classroom environment (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008). Whether or not a teacher is perceived to be a safe person influences the student’s perception of teacher approachability (Malti & Noam, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This question provides insight into the students’ perceptions of teacher approachability reflecting how safe they believe their teachers to be (Davis, 2003; Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Lyles, 2014; Karam, 2006; Saha, 2012).

All of these questions and considerations revolve around the central question that seeks to understand how middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence interactions with their teachers.
Definitions

Terms, which represent psychological and educational concepts, are explained in context throughout this study. The combination of disciplines (psychology and education) helps bring clarity to the focus on middle students’ perceptions of teacher approachability.

Approachability. The comfort level students feel in talking to their teachers about matters that are important to the student to the measure that advice may be pursued and a sense of care received (Denzine & Pulos, 2000). Students deem a teacher to be approachable if that teacher is perceived to be a safe person for expressing oneself through emotional transparency and vulnerability.

Family of origin. This circle of influence can include parents, siblings, extended family, or those who had significant impact in the formation of a student's identity and practices.

Self-advocacy. The ability and skill to find one’s voice and speak up regarding interests, needs, and concerns is self-advocacy (Sebag, 2010). All three of these life skills prepare students well for navigating their educational journeys, particularly in regard to their relationships with their teachers.

Self-determination. The belief that “all individuals have the right to direct their own lives” is self-determination (Sebag, 2010, p. 22).

Self-efficacy. The belief that one has the ability to orchestrate prospective situations and their outcomes is self-efficacy (Danielsen et al., 2009).
Summary

The purpose for pursuing this research study is two-fold: the researcher’s specific interest in evaluating general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and the influence of those perceptions on student-teacher interactions. Understanding the participants cannot represent all middle school students in their perceptions and experiences, the study focuses on common factors adolescents identify in their perceptions of teacher approachability. The study is designed to provide windows of understanding into the adolescent’s experience, personal preferences, life skills, and inherent qualities that form perceptions of teacher approachability. As a grounded theory qualitative study, students’ experiences will be recorded through their stories. As stated previously, the purpose of this study reflects the researcher’s personal and professional interest in understanding middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Gathering and analyzing data from within three different school models provides understanding of similarities and differences in middle school students’ experiences and perceptions. The students will identify strategies that have been effective in their school contexts and the reasoning why some strategies work and others do not when they have decided to approach their teachers to discuss school-related matters. Conversely, students will provide data that will lend insight into the deciding factors when they choose to avoid seeking help from teachers they perceive to be unapproachable.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Upon first review, one might think the issue of students’ perceptions of teacher approachability has been saturated with research and that effective programs have been developed and implemented to address the findings. However, students’ behaviors continue to reveal a hesitancy, and lack of follow through, in student-teacher interactions. Research supports the need for teachers to create safe learning environments for their students (Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2012; Lyles, 2014). The middle school model was originally designed to address the developmental needs of middle school students. However, current trends reveal a gap between research findings, responses to the findings, best practices that have been implemented, and students who continue to perceive their teachers as unapproachable. In essence, response to research has prompted programming that instructs the teacher in creating environments that are effective for teacher-student relationships. Identifying research that explores the students’ perspectives of teacher approachability and, specifically, perceptions that influence student-teacher interactions is the focus of this literature review. The research study will collect data that details the real experiences of its participants in the school context, particularly with the participants’ teachers. Educators and students alike might agree on a shared goal of strong relationships and mutual respect. Programs exist that help bridge the gap between teachers and their students. This journey of literature exploration seeks to reveal how much perceptions of teacher approachability influence the pursuit of student-teacher interactions.
Theoretical Framework

In a grounded theory, qualitative study, existing theoretical thoughts and ideas are considered at the outset of the new research study. These theories provide a “conceptual guide for choosing the concepts to be investigated, for suggesting research questions, and for framing the research findings” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 39). The primary purpose of this specific grounded theory study is not to develop a new theory, but to explain the phenomenon of the study’s focus. The driving force behind this model is to identify any common threads of participants’ experiences to determine whether or not a new or blended theory emerges from the research findings. Simply stated, the researcher investigates if the data generates a new theory or if a theory is grounded in the collected data (Creswell, 2013). In this specific research study, four primary theories form the framework through which the participants’ experiences are examined. Comprising the theoretical framework are the approach-avoidance conflict theory, the social conflict theory, the attachment theory, and the social cognitive theory. An explanation for the reasoning why each theory was identified as relevant to this research study is outlined within the context of each theory’s description.

Approach-Avoidance Conflict Theory

One of the early founders of social psychology, Kurt Lewin (1935) is recognized as the originator of the approach-avoidance conflict theory, which he proposed in the early twentieth century. Other psychologists, such as Bower and Miller (1960) are also identified with Lewin’s (1935) theory. Theorists Whiting and Child (1953) and Sears et al. (1953) developed the approach-avoidance conflict theory further in an attempt to explain aggressive behaviors in humans (Burchard, 1963). Interestingly, cooperation and
competition are linked to the approach-avoidance theories. Cooperation involves both or all parties working together to achieve a commonly valued goal; whereas, competition generally means someone pursues and achieves a specific goal at the expense of others not achieving theirs.

Dollard and Miller (Tanzen, n.d.) base their approach-avoidance findings on the drive-cue-action triggers. For example, the hunger drive is triggered by a cue of hunger pangs and followed by pursuing something to eat. Similarly, a drive for understanding may be triggered by a cue of confusion, resulting in approaching the teacher for enlightenment. However, as pointed out by the approach-avoidance theorists, the assessment of either goal is measured according to three factors: tension, valence, and distance (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Tension is created by the attractiveness or repulsion of the goal; valence is the quality or intensity of the attraction/repulsion; and distance is how easily accessible each goal might be (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). By application to the classroom setting, a student assesses the tension, valence, and distance in deciding whether or not to approach teachers with questions or concerns. Students weigh the perceived inherent value of approaching or avoiding and then decide accordingly what to do with what is on their minds.

There are three types of approach-avoidance tendencies: 1) approach-approach, where a person must choose between two equally desirable goals; 2) avoidance-avoidance, where a person must decide between two negative, equally undesirable outcomes; and 3) approach-avoidance, where a person must weigh the positive outcomes against the negative outcomes, or the perception of each outcome (Roeckelein, 2006).
Although not identified as such, the possibility emerges that fear triggers an approach or avoidance response (Champion, 1961; Elliot et al., 2013; Linnenbrink-Garcia, et al., 2012), which is the function of the amygdala in potential fight, flight, or freeze scenarios of conflict (Elliot, Eder, & Harmon-Jones, 2013). Robinson, Wilkowski, & Meier (2008) and Carver (2015) linked extraversion to those who approach conflict and neuroticism to those who avoid. Although, the motivations to approach or avoid conflict can co-exist at the same time, one cannot physically choose to do both (Robinson et al., 2008).

The approach-avoidance theory has been researched for the purpose of understanding the strategies people implement in order to handle stress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). If someone believes approaching the source of conflict can better control a stressful situation, then this motivation leads to action; however, if a lack of control of the situation seems more likely, then one will tend to avoid the source of conflict (Roth & Cohen, 1986). The tension created by approach-avoid scenarios is directly correlated to the proximity of the goal as well as its inherent value (Knowles & Linn, 2004; Krieglmeyer et al., 2013).

**Social Conflict Theory**

Depending upon one’s worldview, discovering Karl Marx is considered the author of social conflict theory may seem surprising (Marx & Engels, 1978; Rogers, 2013). However, when one considers the basis for his theory and political stance, the seeming incongruence disappears. Marx’s theory revolved around socialistic dynamics between economic groups. His theory proposes conflict can be alleviated when the separation dynamics are removed. Social conflict theory presupposes conflict exists due to
differences in economic position and resources. Marx’s theory is based on the belief the wealthy naturally tend to oppress the poor, which is at the root of all social conflict. Actually, the biblical writer, Paul, best explains in 1Timothy 6:10 what Karl Marx missed in his view of wealth: “the love of money is at the root of evil.” Marx’s theory (Marx & Engels, 1978) presupposes all wealthy people love money and oppress the poor.

Although it may be true that social differences stir conflict, one cannot conclude this is an enduring fact that always holds true. One’s perception of differences can determine if conflict engagement, avoidance, adjustment, or resolution will follow (Ubinger et al., 2013). Although middle school students might experience conflict at school based on economic status, perhaps there are other social dynamics middle school students could encounter resulting in conflict. Marx’s social conflict theory may or may not prove to be a viable theoretical framework for this particular research study, but through the lens of social conflict related to dynamics relevant to the adolescent’s world, the underlying premise of the theory might have viable application (Malti & Noam, 2008).

Approaching conflict from a negative stance may be based more on one’s lack of conflict resolution skills than the nature of the conflict itself if students lack understanding that conflict is a natural part of life (Sadri-Damirchi & Bilge, 2014). Differences in perspective can be at the root of the conflict, yet once understanding of the other’s perspective is achieved, the conflict may very well be resolved. The responses to differences of perspective reflect many different factors. Conflict resolution strategies develop across time through life experiences, according to personality tendencies, through the influence of one’s family of origin, and being the recipient of others’ conflict
resolution strategies (Ahern, 2006; Branje et al., 2009; Williams 2013). Some strategies are intentionally learned and employed; others are non-intentional and reflect responses acquired through time. Automatic responses to conflict become ingrained strategies. When a person experiences undesirable results in conflict resolution, different strategies are sought sometimes. However, this is not always the case. Albert Einstein’s adage, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” sums up many people’s conflict resolution strategies or lack thereof.

**Attachment Theory**

The attachment theory, as proposed by Bowlby (1969), investigates the psychological impact of whether or not babies and young children possess a sense of attachment to significant adults in their early years. The strength of this attachment influences their future relationships, including the methods employed for handling conflict with others (Kiner, 2009; Wei, Heppner, & Mallinckrodt, 2003). Research reveals healthy attachment with caregivers in younger years influences whether or not healthy attachment with others will be probable in later years (Pinata & Harbers, 1996; Wei et al., 2003). Strong attachments in the early years lay the foundation for a sense of security to approach people and situations later on (Davis, 2003 Karam, 2006; Wei et al., 2003). Also, strong attachments produce greater security, which transfers into a sense of confidence in approaching other adults – such as teachers (Davis, 2003 Dykas et al., 2010; Karam, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Four types of attachment are proposed by Bergin and Bergin (2009): secure, insecure/avoidant, insecure/resistant, and insecure/disorganized-disoriented. The first type of attachment, secure, should be the goal of every caregiver. A child who feels
securely attached to a caregiver will more likely develop secure relationships with others in the future (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The second type of attachment – insecure/avoidant – usually occurs when the child experiences primary caregivers who are “insensitive, intrusive, angry, and rejecting” (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 143). Since the child does not feel safe, there will be a tendency to avoid interaction with the caregiver. These tendencies usually carry into future relationships, unless the significant adults in a child’s or adolescent’s life can foster a safe and secure environment.

Insecure/resistant is the third type of attachment where “children fail to derive feelings of security” (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 143) from the primary caregiver, although the caregiver is attempting to provide that security. Children may be “passive, whiney, fussy, helpless, or immature, or they may be angry, petulant, and resistant” toward the caregiver (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 144). The relationship with the caregiver could be described as enmeshed where the child and adult exhibit their need for dependence upon the other for emotional support. While the child needs to attach to the adult, there is still uncertainty the adult is dependable and in control.

The fourth type of attachment is insecure/disorganized-disoriented where the child expresses the desire for attachment, yet exhibits behaviors that are contradictory (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). This type of poor attachment is reflective of the child’s sense that the caregiver is not safe or predictable. The caregivers’ responses to the child can range from aggressive outbursts to extreme insensitivity (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The child longs for attachment, yet significant adults do not provide safety and security for healthy attachment to occur.
The significance of healthy attachments is partly revealed in an adolescent’s success at school, academically and otherwise (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Security of attachment predicts academic achievement and a greater willingness to accept academic challenges (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Children who are insecure often display behaviors of frustration, anxiety, hostility, and emotional disconnectedness (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Conversely, healthy attachment provides the framework and foundation for socializing with peers and interacting with other adults. Secure children learn how to regulate their emotions internally as well as display appropriate expression externally.

Typically, an adolescent begins a journey towards independence during the middle school years. A desire to be more self-sufficient and self-dependent characterizes this life stage, until such a time that the adolescent might need to appeal for help from an adult. If the adolescent experienced healthy attachments to caregivers in the early years, the likelihood of seeking help from other significant adults, such as teachers, is more prevalent (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Bowlby, 1969; Pianta & Harbers, 1996). For the healthy-attached adolescent, other significant adults are generally safe to approach for help.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura (1989) is widely known as the originator of the social cognitive theory, which also guides the researcher’s understanding of students’ perceptions of experiences and events in their lives. One must consider the dynamics of the social cognitive theory in relation to students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. According to Bandura (1989), people possess the capability of controlling the impact of events in their lives, at
least to some degree. “Children bring to their interactions with others a set of prior expectancies that affect relationship outcomes such as rapport and liking” (Gurland & Evangelista, 2014, p. 2). By application to this research study, adolescents can exercise critical thinking skills by implementing metacognitive strategies before taking action (Bandura, 1989). Exercising metacognition would mean the students are examining their perspectives and thought processes in order to determine if they are based on truth and accuracy. Granted, no one is able to determine someone else’s responses or actions. However, through practicing well-reasoned approaches, students stand a greater chance for a positive result than a negative response (Caprara, Vecchione, Barbaranelli, & Alessandri, 2013).

As with any generation of students, fostering their social and emotional development are as equally vital as meeting their intellectual and academic needs. However, as never before in generations past, today’s students have surpassed previous students in the technology realm and understandably so. No previous generation has experienced the technology explosion as this generation has experienced. At the same time, this generation is generally delayed in social and emotional development (Elmore, 2010). Because of this delay, social and emotional development programs have been developed in schools in order to close students’ gaps in these critical areas (Durlak et al., 2011; LaRusso & Selman, 2011). This research study considers the part social cognitive theory plays in investigating middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and their influence on student-teacher interactions.
Related Literature

From the theoretical framework outlined, several factors are proposed which potentially influence middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Some factors are embedded in the students’ family dynamics including the manner in which conflict is handled in their homes, the student’s personality, natural adolescent needs and distinctions, relevant school programs geared specifically for middle school students, effective professional development for teachers to better equip them in reaching the middle school student’s needs, the health of teacher-student relationships, and the strategies students are taught and encouraged to implement towards self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-efficacy.

Origins

A student’s self-perception and identity is rooted in one’s family of origin as established during the formative years of childhood. A picture of one’s self is drawn in reflection of the messages received about personality, character, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, appearance, or perceived flaws in any of these components. The student’s home is the first place where learning how to live in community and relationship with others takes place (Danielsen, et al., 2009). A sense of self-worth and capacity to contribute to the family affirms a student’s perception of having something valuable to give.

Additionally, a student’s sense of satisfaction, both in life and in school, is reflective of a sense of family, teacher, peer, and community support. As much as a student might long to be the master of one’s own ship and make decisions independently of others, the student still thrives with the support of others. There may be resistance to
boundaries and rules, yet it is these same parameters that provide a sense of safety and security, especially in these developmental years.

From this study’s theoretical framework, research bears out the impact family conflict holds in shaping students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Students have observed the strategies their parents and other adults utilize in interacting with others. Not only have students witnessed strategies for addressing issues, but also the responses of the other party. Therefore, students are more likely to imitate their parents’ strategies (Bradford et al., 2007; Feldman et al., 2010; Kiner, 2009) or even avoid approaching others about issues if these strategies do not appear to reap their own desired effect. Research demonstrates this is also true in relationships with siblings (Tucker & Kazura, 2013). The home environment provides the initial stage for students as they choose their own methods for addressing issues (Ahern, 2006; Bradford et al., 2012; Branje et al., 2009; Kiner, 2009).

Equally true, adolescent choices and behaviors negatively impact their homes and family dynamics. When a student becomes involved in risky behaviors, not only does potential suffering of consequences for these choices exist, but also relationships and future opportunities become part of the fallout as well (Malti & Noam, 2008). A child reflects a sense of identity and self-worth from what is received from those who should know the student best – family. If the family unit is disconnected or dysfunctional, the student’s bearings become unstable and the journey through the potentially tumultuous years creates mental and emotional instability (Malti & Noam, 2008).

Another aspect of family dynamics related to approaching or avoiding issues is . Cultural differences, both within the native cultural context as well as cultural mores
expected outside the native context, have been factored into how, or if, students will address issues with their teachers (Feldman et al., 2010). The manner in which family members learn to address issues may reflect their family of origin’s cultural expectations (Feldman et al., 2010). For one to go outside those cultural mores may be considered unacceptable at best and shameful at worst (Feldman et al., 2010).

The degree of attachment students feel towards their parents has a direct correlation to how these students handle issues with their teachers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). If students are more secure in their familial relationships, they are more likely to exhibit confidence in handling matters appropriately (Dykas et al., 2010; Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2013; Kiner, 2009). However, if the primary parent-child relationship is viewed as being disconnected or conflicted, students are more likely to withdraw from other authoritarian relationships, such as those with their teachers. These students lack the confidence and security of relationship in order to handle matters themselves (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2013).

An additional insight about family dynamics and its influence on students’ confidence in approaching their teachers is the parents’ own experiences during their middle school years (Williams, 2013). If parents were negatively impacted by their own memories of middle school years as they interacted with their teachers, then they were likely to communicate, and transfer these experiences to their children (Williams, 2013).

**Adolescent Needs and Differences**

In the adolescent stage of development, students can wrestle with social, mental, and emotional feelings of inadequacy they never experienced previously. Socioeconomic factors increase these challenges even further (Malti & Noam, 2008). Whereas these
factors may not have been as noticeable to the elementary student, an awareness of socioeconomic differences begins to emerge in the adolescent mind. Generally, the young adolescent gravitates towards sameness with peers; differences are not desirable. Because of the normal developmental distinctions of the adolescent period, issues can be compounded when a student’s mental, emotional, or social problems are added to the mix (Malti & Noam, 2008). The adolescent who is mentally, emotionally, and socially secure and satisfied is more likely to experience academic success and vice versa (Malti & Noam, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The young adolescent mind finds it difficult to understand the connection between academic achievement and behavioral frame of reference.

In addition to cultural dynamics that may influence students’ process in deciding whether or not to approach their teachers are other significant needs and differences research has considered. Gender differences are noted in homes of aggression and violence where boys generally become more aggressive, yet girls internalize their experiences (Ahern, 2006). Therefore, boys reared in homes of conflict are more likely to confront their teachers, whereas girls from homes of conflict are more likely to avoid any potential confrontation (Ahern, 2006). Girls also have a tendency to believe affecting any change in a situation is not within their control (Karam, 2006; Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1999).

Gender-divided classes have recaptured the attention of researchers and educators in recent years. While identifying male and female differences in their learning and social needs, schools have responded by creating gender-divided classes and implementing pedagogical strategies that address each gender’s distinctions effectively
Recognizing gender differences in the learning process is the beginning step as teachers rethink and redesign their approaches to teaching and learning (Raider-Roth et al., 2008). When teachers demonstrate an appreciation for gender differences, and adjust their teaching strategies to accommodate those differences, they communicate greater approachability to their students (Raider-Roth et al., 2008). Generally speaking, girls are more relationally driven than boys are, so a longing to feel connected to teachers and experience greater satisfaction in life and school is more pertinent to girls than to boys (Danielsen et al., 2009). Boys find greater satisfaction outside the school setting in realms such as sports and other activities (Danielsen et al., 2009). Age differences of adolescents are also considered in researching how adolescents cope with varied stressors in their lives (Karam, 2006; Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1999). Younger adolescents are more prone to being tentative in addressing stressors in their lives because they view themselves as being less skilled in assessing the situation and determining effective next steps (La Russo & Selman, 2011; Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1999). The middle adolescent is more apt to manage the problem or pursue viable solutions without seeking help (Williams & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1999).

Helping students develop a healthy sense of resiliency during the adolescent years is a major key in their mental, emotional, and social development, all connected to their academic success as well (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noan, 2013; Malti & Noam, 2008). During this season of an adolescent’s development, learning how to view and manage hardship, inequities, disappointments, self-identity, loss, and doubts provides perspective for present circumstances and strategies for future challenges. The adolescent years can
cause loss of footing and an overwhelming sense of confusion about finding one’s place in the world (Malti & Noam, 2008). Doubt can replace confidence in whether or not the adolescent has what it takes to be successful. This life stage presents a critically important time to help students develop resiliency, which is grounded in an accurate picture of themselves and a promising view of their futures.

A natural progression of adolescent development is an increasing desire to pursue independence and autonomy (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005). Adolescent students may not realize they are caught in a power struggle with themselves. They are moving towards independence and taking control of their lives at the same time they recognize their dependence upon others to meet their needs. In one sense they want to handle their own challenges, yet, in another, they want someone to handle the challenges for them. So they are faced with the tension of whether or not they can approach their teachers about school related matters, partly due to their quest to be independent.

**Middle School Model Versus Junior High Model**

The evolution of grade level structuring has progressed from the one-room schoolhouse where all grade levels received instruction to a kindergarten through eighth grades and high school model followed by the formation of a junior high between elementary and high school model to today’s typical model of elementary, middle, and high school divisions (Board, n.d.). The recognition of specific developmental needs of early adolescents was the underlying reasoning behind the impetus to create the junior high and middle school models (Board, n.d.). The junior high model was focused on equipping students for their high school years – a junior, high school model (Bedard & Do, 2005; Board, n.d.). The underlying belief was young adolescents would achieve
greater academic success in high school if they received a more rigorous course of study during the junior high years. However, this model failed to acknowledge and address the specific characteristics and needs of the early adolescent (Board, n.d.; Dhuey, 2011).

Educators recognized students in this life stage need environments and people that are safe. The key players in an adolescent’s life need to fully understand the developmental challenges of this period of time as well as best practices for connecting with and supporting young people through a potentially turbulent season (Malti & Noam, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The subsequent middle school model paid more attention to the developmental needs of adolescents than its predecessor junior high model (Board, n.d.). “The middle school movement of the 1960s changed schools’ focus to the human development of individuals transitioning from childhood to adulthood” (Sands, 2011, p. 42). Students could thrive in an environment that was designed with their needs and challenges in mind (Bedard & Do, 2005; Board, n.d.). This newer model was designed around a mentor/mentee relationship where each student was assigned to a mentoring teacher who would help the student successfully navigate the middle school years (Board, n.d.; Sands, 2011). In turn, the mentors were trained in ways they could relate to and support their mentees through this developmental stage. With the original middle school model, teachers were trained in mentoring their students and the structure of the daily schedule provided time for mentors/mentees to meet together. Strategies such as block teaching, where teachers teach two subjects; common planning periods for teachers to have time to collaborate together; and looping, where teachers teach the same students for two to three years, were implemented to provide better connections between teachers and students in order to strengthen their relationships with each other (Board, n.d.). The
underlying belief was stronger teacher-student relationships would promote greater academic success and social/emotional stability for middle school students.

The model was not flawed; however, the ongoing implementation of its design soon began to wane and middle school became just another season in a student’s secondary education. The mentoring model soon gave way to large class sizes and risk-management concerns. Therefore, a model that was specifically designed with the middle school student’s developmental and social/emotional needs, was abandoned in order to accommodate the economic needs of education and litigation bents of society.

Of course, not all school districts adopted the middle school model for the reasoning of its proposed inherent value. Some school systems viewed the model as a means to alleviate overcrowding in elementary schools, facilitate better usage of school properties, and reflect the community’s stance on racial segregation/integration (Board, n.d.). Those who opposed the middle school model did so based upon their perception that students’ academic progress would be hindered if programming and structure were adjusted to accommodate developmental needs (Norton, 2000). The common belief held that changing the learning environment compromised the academic rigor. There was not a sense of both being possibile where rigor could be accomplished in a more developmentally sensitive setting.

**Professional Development for Middle School Teachers**

In conjunction with recognizing the distinct needs of middle school students, specific professional development is available for educators in order to equip them to understand adolescents’ academic, social, and emotional needs (Karam, 2006; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Sands, 2011). Although professional certifications are granted for
kindergarten through eighth grade educators, additionally specialized courses have been
designed with the middle school instructor in mind. Equipping educators with strategies
to help students verbalize their perspectives of concerns is one of many tactics for
fostering successful navigation of the middle school years (Baraldi & Iervese, 2010;
Milsom & Gallo, 2006; Saha, 2012). Due to the place educational systems hold in
western societies, schools must address the emotional, social, and mental dynamics of
adolescent development in helping students achieve academic success, which is a primary
goal of education (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Since students spend the most significant
amount of their time in school, it stands to reason that faculty and staff members should
be well equipped and resourced to address adolescents’ needs effectively (Board, n.d.;
Malti & Noam, 2008).

Even though cultural mores may determine how adolescent issues are handled, it
is interesting to note that common issues of this life stage cross cultural barriers
(Rajalakshmi et al., 2012; Saha, 2012). In one particular study in India, the need for
instructing adolescents in effective conflict resolution strategies was addressed through a
program that was developed and implemented with a sample of students (Rajalakshmi et
al., 2012). Instruction and role-playing opportunities were provided in order to help
students anticipate and engage in common issues of conflict. Students were equipped
with strategies for navigating through relational conflict with their peers, teachers,
parents, and siblings. The focus of this study investigates middle school students’
perceptions of teacher approachability and their influence on student-teacher interactions
leading to teaching adolescents how to resolve conflict. Conflict resolution strategies are
applicable across cultural, gender, age, status, worldview, and lifestyle preference
differences (Saha, 2012). Although middle school teachers may be well equipped to facilitate academic learning in their classrooms, oftentimes they are not well informed about the adolescent mindset and inherent social and emotional challenges (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Greater focus has been given to managing conflict effectively, while neglecting to coach teachers in helping students address concerns before the concerns turn into conflict (Lane-Garon et al., 2012; Saha, 2012). Empowering teachers to grasp the magnitude of their influence in students’ lives begins with effective professional development relevant to the middle school educator (Malti & Noah, 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Saha, 2012). However, relevant professional development is as vital for equipping individual teachers as it is for developing an entire school climate (Davis, 2003; LaRusso & Selman, 2011).

Traditionally, career educators received instruction that targeted elementary or high school instruction and neglected the specific dynamics relevant to the middle school educator (Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). Therefore, young adolescents’ educational journeys were relegated to sitting under the tutelage of instructors who were not properly prepared to understand the learning process of their students or the social/emotional needs of their learners. When this gap was acknowledged, professional development for middle school educators was created not only to address structural changes in daily schedules, but also instructional methods that promised to be more attuned to the developmental needs of adolescents (Board, n.d.; Radcliffe & Mandeville, 2007). Workshops that focused on best pedagogical practices for curriculum and instruction of middle school students combined with internal structural changes helped produce the most effective learning environments for young adolescents (Board, n.d.). Changing
instructional practices became the sticking point for many educators who either did not understand or agree with the developmental needs of adolescents or were reticent to adjust their former pedagogical methods (Board, n.d.). Identifying adolescent needs and best practices to meet those needs is one thing; effecting change is quite another (Heath & Heath, 2010). Professional development for middle school educators is most effective when the leader conveys a sense of stepping into the educators’ shoes, collaborating around possible solutions, and thereby, creating buy-in. The real possibility exists that those who teach may not be as teachable as they expect their students to be. Therefore, effective professional development leaders must have something deemed worthy to reveal and then propose realistic and tangible next steps for implementation.

**Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teachers, who understand the significant role they play and influence they possess, can help students gain confidence in their interactions with teachers (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). Research studies confirm that bullying behaviors normally peak during the middle school years coinciding with the social/emotional development of students (LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Sands, 2011). During these critical years, adolescents experience a sense of inadequacy, lack of confidence, and uncertainty about their differences (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). In order to help students successfully navigate these often-tumultuous years, educators should be well resourced to offer support, understanding, and guidance through natural and structured relationships. “Research indicates that positive student-teacher relationships show a direct impact on academic success” (Malti & Noam, 2008, p. 18). Additionally, students are motivated to achieve greater academic success when they perceive their teachers to be caring (Cornelius-
White, 2007; Matsumura et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Effective caregiving is noted to include teachers modeling care for others, an engaging communication style of dialogue, relevant classroom rules and expectations, and a nurturing environment (Matsumura et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Even if students do not feel they are well connected to their peers, they draw significant motivation if they feel connected to and cared for by their teachers (Cornelius-White; 2007; Wentzel, 1997). Helping teachers recall the developmental and social/emotional dynamics of middle school students is a significant aspect of resourcing the teachers in their relationships with their students. Research affirms that the parent-child relationship is the primary one of influence in a child’s life; however, other significant adults (such as teachers) have tremendous influence as well (Karam, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Smith & Denton, 2009).

The underlying premise of the attachment theory affirms adolescents’ critical needs for feeling connected to the primary and secondary people in their lives. Initially, a child’s parents and primary caregivers fulfill the need for attachment. Secondarily, other significant adults in a child’s life, and later in an adolescent’s life, help fulfill the need for attachment and connectedness (Rishel, Cottrell, Cottrell, Stanton, Gibson, & Bougher, 2007). These secondary relationships can be with grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, coaches, youth leaders, neighbors, family friends, and other significant adults (Rishel et al., 2007). Generally, other adults do not overshadow the parent’s primary role for attachment and connectedness; however, secondary relationships can also provide value and confidence to an adolescent’s self-perception. Due to the fact that teachers consistently spend a large amount of time with their adolescent students, the opportunity for providing a sense of connectedness and support is significant (Rishel et al., 2007).
Growth, maturation, independence, and development do not preclude the fact that adolescents continue to experience a need for attachment and connectedness (Rishel et al., 2007). Interestingly enough, though, parents may perceive that secondary adult relationships are stronger and more influential in their adolescents’ lives than the students perceive them to be in reality (Rishel et al., 2007).

Students’ perceptions of whether or not teachers are emotionally safe people may determine if the teacher is approachable in an adolescent’s mind (Davis, 2003; Danielsen et al., 2009; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Lyles, 2014; Karam, 2006; Saha, 2012). Middle school students often find their teachers not to be as friendly and supportive as they experienced with their elementary teachers (Board, n.d.; Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; Matsumura et al., 2008). This seemingly cultural paradigm shift can result in students not feeling connected to their teachers and a loss of motivation to pursue their best academic performance (Matsumura et al., 2008). Effective professional development enables the teacher to enter into the middle school student’s cultural paradigm in order to relate to the adolescent’s perspective and challenges (Saha, 2012). Teachers have a challenging task of extending acceptance to their students, while, at the same time, not accepting inappropriate behaviors (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005). Students, who perceive their teachers to be caring and supportive, are likely to receive guidance in managing the common frustrations and anxieties of the typical adolescent day (Davis, 2006; Karam, 2006; Kauffman, 2013). Teacher-student relationships have an aspect of mutuality and require pursuance by both parties (Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; Sands, 2011). However, the student is more likely to be the responder as the teacher initiates an appropriate, caring relationship (Davis, 2003; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).
A sense of safety in the classroom and general school setting is established through a teacher’s classroom management style, in particular, and the cultural climate of expectations for appropriate behaviors and interactions. Students should be able to trust their teachers and administrators to provide a safe learning environment and effectively address those who disregard the expectation (Bauer, Burno, & Millstone, 2009). Unacceptable behaviors, which continue to be tolerated, help solidify the belief the environment is unsafe and the culture is unstable. One phenomenon that has drawn significant attention is the issue of bullying and its impact on a school’s environment and students’ sense of safety. Educators agree bullying can include physical, verbal, relational, and reactive behaviors (Milsom & Gallo, 2006); however, effective measures for addressing these behaviors continues to be debatable. Developing a culture that collectively takes a stand against bullying behaviors promises to have the most effective impact for creating a culture of intolerance. With this collaborative strategy in place, students may be more likely to inform their teachers if bullying behaviors are experienced or observed (Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

The most effective middle school teachers will initiate respect for their students in order to model mutual respect in the teacher/student relationship as well as students with their peers (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Matsumura et al., 2008). A climate built on mutual respect helps create an environment for productive, rigorous discussions, where the teachers can provide prompts to inspire students to think critically and engage with one another collaboratively. A classroom culture, where mutual respect is expected and enforced, helps students develop confidence in expressing their perspectives (Matsumura et al., 2008). This safe setting fosters exploration of ideas and spurs more
aggressive quests for achievement. Students also grow socially and emotionally as a result of their mental stretching – all made possible through a teacher who understands the responsibility of creating a safe environment where mutual respect is expected. Students who experience a sense of community within their classrooms are more likely to view their school life positively and experience academic achievement as well (Matsumura et al., 2008). The classroom environment stirs a positive, or negative, cycle for students. A safe climate fosters good emotional health, which then leads to academic achievement, which then helps students’ self-confidence and self-perception, which prompts more academic achievement, and the cycle continues. However, the converse is true as well. When students do not perceive their teachers are in control by enforcing a mutually respectful climate, risk is low, emotional safety is uncertain resulting in academic apathy (Matsumura et al., 2008). This paradigm is especially true of middle school students who already wrestle with their identity and confidence. In their minds, students wonder if they are considered normal and if they have any areas of strength. Students view themselves through their perceived areas of weakness before reminding themselves of their strengths. When teachers create safe environments, rigorous, differentiated instruction and collaborative, innovative thinking challenge students to thrive academically as well as develop socially and emotionally (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013; Matsumura et al., 2008). By contrast, teachers who fail to create and enforce caring classroom climates, neglect the adverse effect such an environment has on the mental, social, emotional, and academic development and growth of their students (Matsumura et al., 2008).
The desire for mutuality of relationship between adolescents and their teachers can be fulfilled when adolescents sense their teachers are safe and caring. Students respond well when teachers convey belief in the students’ abilities to succeed. At the same time, teachers need to establish a balance between extending themselves to their students and affording the students the opportunity to take initiative in approaching teachers on the students’ own terms (Davis, 2003).

**Self-efficacy, Self-determination, and Self-advocacy**

As noted previously, a person begins to develop self-perception during the childhood years and builds upon or adjusts that perception throughout the course of life. However, it is during the adolescent years that one’s self-perception is particularly challenged. An adolescent has a natural desire to be independent and autonomous, to be in charge of life and making one’s own decisions (Gurland & Evangelista, 2014). A healthy and accurate sense of self-efficacy bids the adolescents well as they move in the direction of autonomy. Self-efficacy is the belief that one has the ability to orchestrate prospective situations and their outcomes (Bandura, 1991; Caprara et al., 2013; Danielsen et al., 2009). When students’ decisions lead them in a foolish, non-productive direction, though, someone needs to help offer guidance so a healthy sense of self-efficacy can continue to flourish as the students experience positive outcomes. Self-efficacy leads to academic success, which leads to satisfaction in school, resulting in satisfaction in life (Danielsen et al., 2009). The converse is true as well when adolescents’ self-efficacy is reduced, resulting in lower academic achievement, leading to diminished satisfaction in both school and life. Parents and classroom teachers hold the keys to adolescents’ level
of self-efficacy, which is reflected in the strength of their mutual relationships (Danielsen et al., 2009).

Understanding the development of middle school students who are self-learners is the impetus for many teachers as they structure their classrooms. In addition, teachers recognize the importance of transferring the onus of responsibility for academic and behavioral success from dependence upon a set of classroom rules to a sense of personal ownership (Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; Sands, 2011). “Students who could regulate their academic behaviors and emotions in the classroom generally reported more positive relationships with their teachers” (Davis, 2003, p. 208). When students perceive they hold a sense of control over their personal success they are more likely to feel increased confidence in approaching their teachers about concerns they have (Karam, 2006). Additionally, students who possess an accurate perception of their abilities and accept their responsibility for academic achievement have a greater sense of life and school satisfaction (Danielsen et al., 2009). However, students achieve greater success and sense more significant satisfaction in school if they have a healthy sense of connectedness with and support from their teachers (Danielsen et al., 2009). Striving for autonomy is not at odds with the pursuit of wanting to be connected to one’s teachers. Both desires dwell within the hearts and minds of students and, when fulfilled, help create a sense of well-being and balance in their perspectives (Danielsen et al., 2009).

Understanding the cognitive development of adolescents, and thereby adjusting expectations in their exhibiting ownership and responsibility in the academic and behavioral realms is vital in encouraging students’ self-determination and self-advocacy practices (Kauffman, 2013). Generally, though, self-advocacy is connected to
exceptionality including both ends of the spectrum. Gifted students, as well as students with learning challenges, oftentimes have been the recipients of programs that teach self-advocacy (Douglas, 2004; Sebag, 2010). The shared belief is that students of exceptionality are the ones who need to find their voices and learn to speak up for themselves. Although this may be true, equally true is the fact that all students need to find their voices and develop skills of self-advocacy. Programs designed to teach self-advocacy to students usually focus on academic issues as opposed to social/emotional matters (Douglas, 2004); however, all students benefit from self-advocacy coaching in all realms of their young lives. This type of coaching provides life skills for students to use in future relationships, careers, and normal challenges they will face.

Self-determination is defined as “the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their lives” (Sebag, 2010, p. 22). Helping students embrace this concept is not generally the challenge as much as helping them to understand the responsibility that accompanies what they believe are their rights. Both self-determination and self-advocacy are life skills that equip students with a sense of ownership and responsibility for the direction of their lives. A certain amount of control is within reach for students who recognize the inherent power of self-advocacy and self-determination (Gurland & Evangelista, 2014). Training students in these skills reaps great rewards for the students as well as their teachers. Adolescents develop a sense of owning their present outcomes when they embrace productive choices and teachers benefit when they can spend more time teaching and collaborating with their students than correcting their inappropriate behaviors (Bauer et al., 2009).
One of the challenges presented at this stage of development is the adolescent’s transition from concrete to formal operational thinking (Vernon, 2009). Adolescents begin to think more abstractly and can connect cause and effect theoretically, but do not always apply these reasoning skills in their own decision-making processes (Vernon, 2009). Cognitive development is directly impacted by social/emotional maturation, but not always balanced and representative of correlation equivalency according to Piaget’s theory (Miller, 2011). Students may demonstrate cognitive development in the academic realm, yet be delayed socially and emotionally. Thus, middle school students may present as having reached a level of cognitive maturity demonstrated by their academic achievements, yet make behavioral choices that appear less than rational in comparison.

Although not exclusive to the adolescent years, dealing with bullying behaviors and navigating conflict are vitally important for middle school students to develop healthy self-perceptions as well as effective self-advocacy strategies (Danielsen et al., 2009). Adolescents’ self-identity is relegated to their peers’ descriptions, interactions, and communication with others. Gone are the days when young students held their reputations within their own control. In adolescence, students fight for self-identity at the same time they are trying to correct any flawed perceptions by their peers. Becoming the target of a bully or embroiled in conflict can reflect erroneous perceptions of one’s peers, especially if the victimized adolescents do not find their voices and speak up for themselves. Middle school students begin to see themselves through others’ eyes and how others treat them then determine self-worth accordingly. The ever-changing social media venues utilized by students add another dimension to an accurate self-perception and combatting erroneous perceptions of others. Cyberbullying is a formidable issue that
only serves to challenge a student’s progress in developing an accurate and healthy self-perception. Cyberbullying is not easily addressed or managed due to the great havoc it creates in the hearts and minds of adolescents. Students need help to develop an accurate perception of themselves in this season of their lives and then determine where they want to go, thereby bringing greater clarity to an often-confused young mind. How equipped educators are to help students in this realm of self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy may be revealed in the data gathering process of this research study.

Summary

Identifying the Gap

“The student voice is missing from the body of research on positive relationships in the classroom” (Kauffman, 2013, p. 33). Even though a sense of connectedness of the student toward the teacher has been identified as a significant factor in a student’s success, students continue to wrestle with teacher approachability, which influences their interactions with their teachers. Feeling as though their teachers were not concerned about their academic success or emotional/social wellbeing explains why a large percentage of students drop out of school (Karam, 2006). Karam (2006) suggests an authoritative approach to teaching and classroom management that also mirrors an authoritative approach to parenting promotes a sense of security for students with their teachers (Karam, 2006). With the social/emotional challenges of the developing adolescent, the need for connectedness to one’s teacher is critically important. In fact, when students’ family relationships are tenuous, the strength of their relationships with teachers may provide the safety net and ongoing encouragement to experience the support and success students need and desire (Karam, 2006).
“When teachers become more willing to take risks and relate to their students, students reciprocate the effort, and dialogue begins, thus the opportunity for a relationship is initiated” (Sands, 2011, p. 45). Such positive teacher-student relationships help ground the student and foster better decision-making and engagement (Karam, 2006). The literature acknowledges potential conflict in the school context as well as programs developed over the years to teach conflict resolution strategies. The approach-avoidance theory helps one understand the tension created when a student perceives a teacher is not approachable, yet has questions or issues to discuss. This tension is not necessarily a matter of conflict as it may be a quest for understanding. So, the focus on helping students navigate matters of conflict has missed the mark in equipping students to know how to address issues before they become conflicts (Saha, 2012). Perhaps the louder voices of conflict have beckoned a response of research and programming, whereas the quieter voices of expressing concerns that pre-empt conflict resolution have gone basically unheard.

Lyles’ dissertation (2014) focused on an anticipated factor of this research study, yet from a school counselor’s perspective. Lyles examined the phenomenon of teacher-to-student mistreatment and the repercussions for students of such behaviors exhibited by their teachers (Lyles, 2014). Lyles (2014) pointed out that only three related studies of teacher-to-student mistreatment had been conducted in the United States. Lyles’ (2014) identified gap in the literature review focused on the school counselor’s experiences and perspective. The gap revealed through this literature review exposes the fact that the students’ voices are missing from the research. Researchers have gathered data around the issue of students approaching or avoiding their teachers, but the students’ recounting
of their own experiences are sorely lacking. Students’ hesitancy in approaching their teachers is recognized, but responses to the phenomenon have been calculated according to what is deemed best for the students, without actually hearing from the students themselves.

**Explaining the Gap**

Students have expressed a tension in wanting to approach their teachers about school-related matters, yet not felt empowered to do so. These feelings result in students becoming reluctant to approach others when needing assistance (Karam, 2006). Understanding the breadth of reasons why students would perceive they are helpless in approaching their teachers is the focus of this research study. The ideal scenario creates environments where student-teacher relationships are so secure, open, supportive, and mutually engaging that conflicts are circumvented or handled expeditiously and effectively (Sands, 2011). Studies have been conducted that help explain the methods implemented by effective teachers in establishing strong and secure relationships with their students; however, research is lacking to explain the factors that weigh in on the students’ perceptions of teacher approachability that influence student-teacher interactions. Programs have been created that focus on teacher development in order to equip teachers in creating conducive environments for establishing appropriate relationships with their students (Durlak et al., 2011; Lyles, 2014). Research is still lacking in order to understand the students’ perceptions of whether or not their teachers are approachable and how those perceptions influence student-teacher interactions.

While a gap in the literature has been acknowledged, one must acknowledge the challenges of developing a methodology for gathering the data in such a manner that the
students’ voices are heard and the core issues of the matter are identified. Establishing a measure of mutual trust with the students will be crucial in order to produce a research study of merit. Students must feel that their perspectives matter, the recounting of their experiences will be protected, and their participation will result in improvements made for themselves, their classmates and, potentially, middle school students in other places. The participants must be reassured there is inherent value in the research study and their participation will result in appropriate changes from which they and others will benefit.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

For a qualitative grounded theory study, certain methodologies are appropriate for collecting and analyzing data. Beginning with a theoretical framework helps to guide the research study. The goal of this research was to generate a model that explained how middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence interactions with their teachers. Corbin and Strauss (2015) propose that a grounded theory design examines the potential development of a theory from data collected through a qualitative study.

This chapter explains the rationale for a grounded theory design for this research study, the procedures for choosing the participants, and the methods for gathering and analyzing the data. The central research question that focused the study is how do middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? The three subquestions that guided the research revolved around the social constructs in school, the student’s home environment, and the student-teacher relationships that impact students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, which then influence student-teacher interactions. The trustworthiness of the researcher’s work as evidenced through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are verified through the integrity of the methods employed in the study and outlined in this chapter. All ethical considerations are also acknowledged and addressed to ensure confidentiality for the participants, their families, and their schools.
Design

The nature of this research study focuses on middle school students’ experiences and perceptions, thus lending itself to a qualitative versus quantitative design. The participants’ stories speak through the collected data in order to better understand their perceptions of teacher approachability (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation of data collection and analysis in a qualitative design is appropriate for capturing the complexity of the participants’ stories through their own voices and corroborating findings across multiple data sources (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The grounded theory design facilitates hearing and recording the participants’ voices as they reveal their perceptions of teacher approachability. The participants’ stories provide the data so that a potential theoretical underpinning emerges from the data. A purposeful sampling of general education middle school students from three different school models provide an appropriate amount of data from which a new theory could emerge around students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and the different ways these perceptions influence interactions with their teachers.

A grounded theory design provides the framework for this research study. An initial review of literature suggests that a phenomenon exists, particularly among middle school students. Although research has been conducted that reveals the needs of middle school students – particularly in their school day experiences – and programs have subsequently been developed to help meet those needs, there appears to be a gap between teachers understanding the needs of general education middle school students and then following through by demonstrating their approachability towards their students. The phenomenon suggests students perceive teachers to be unapproachable, which then
impacts their interactions with their teachers, specifically when the students need or desire to seek their teachers’ help. By following a grounded theory design, specifically with a constructivist approach, a measure of rich data is collected through the stories and recounting of middle school students’ experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Rather than presuppose the reasoning for students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, a grounded theory design facilitates the participants explaining their own perceptions themselves.

Specifically, a constructivist approach in the grounded theory design helps identify or clarify an emerging theory for this research study. The constructivist viewpoint proposes, “concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 10). Gathering data through the recounting of experiences and detailing of perspectives provides knowledge for the researcher and participants, which leads to understanding of the phenomenon and interpretation through an emerging theory (Creswell, 2013).

**Research Questions**

This qualitative grounded theory study addresses one central research question: How do middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? The research study considers the factors that comprise a student’s perspective of teacher approachability. Previous personal experiences may influence students’ perceptions of teacher approachability (Karam, 2006; Kauffman, 2013; Wagner-Pacifici & Hall, 2012). The study considers if a student
has had positive or negative interactions with a teacher that develop students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, which then influence subsequent student-teacher interactions. Students’ perceptions of others’ experiences may influence whether or not teachers are perceived to be approachable (Williams, 2013). There are three subquestions that help guide the research study:

1. How, if at all, do social constructs in school affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability?

2. How, if at all, does home environment affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability?

3. How, if at all, does the student-teacher relationship affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability?

All of these questions and considerations revolve around the central question that seeks to understand how middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence their interactions with teachers.

**Setting**

The administrators of three identified schools were contacted in order to secure their verbal permission to proceed with the study. The schools – one public, one secular private, and one Christian private - are located in three different counties in the metro area. Each administrator was emailed in order to request a brief meeting to present the proposal for the research study (see Appendix A). The precise procedures for approaching the administrators and soliciting participants are explained in the next section. Each step of the research study required prior IRB approval (see Appendices C, D, and E) and Accountability and Research approval from the public school’s county (see
Appendix H), along with the permission of administrators, parents of participants, and the participants themselves (see Appendices F, G, I, and J).

Schools were selected according to the diversity of demographics. The reasoning for three different models of school lies in the belief that rich data will emerge from three different settings as well as offer a compare/contrast in order to help determine commonalities or differences of students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. In the metro area, a secular private school generally draws a different constituency than a private Christian school. Potential participants were identified after answering a one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K) that targeted students who acknowledged perceptions of teacher unapproachability. Students who revealed such perceptions were given a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix L) that helped narrow the purposeful sampling while seeking diversity of participants. The actual names of schools were not identified as the schools were assigned pseudonyms. No formal relationship or supervisory role with any of the schools or their students was a factor in this study.

Swensen Middle School (pseudonym) was the public school that participated in this research study. The school has 901 students, 49% males and 51% females. The student body of Swensen is made up of four ethnicities: 5% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 29% Black, 48% White, and 5% two or more ethnicities. The student/teacher ratio is 14:1 with 61 full-time teachers. Thirty-five percent of the students are considered “economically disadvantaged” with 34% receiving subsidized lunches.

Founded in 2001, the Alpha Academy is a PK-eighth grade institution of 300 students with 26% minority enrollment. The teacher student ratio is 12:1 with a
maximum class size of 18 students. Fifty-nine percent of the teachers hold advanced degrees. The Academy boasts of an Innovation Center where students are “prepared as thinkers, creators, and problem-solvers for the 21st century.” The Academy’s website states, “High expectations for achievement, creativity, self-discipline, and social responsibility are the cornerstones of The (Alpha) Academy.” Six research study participants represent middle school students at The Alpha Academy.

Metro Christian School (pseudonym) was the Christian school that was approached to participate in the study and agreed. Metro Christian first opened its doors in 1968 with one hundred fifty students. Currently, Metro Christian has over 1800 students, preschool through twelfth grades. Students come to Metro Christian from 90 different zip codes and 14 different counties. Thirty-one percent of the student body represents racial, cultural, or ethnic diversity. The school is the third largest private school in Georgia and accredited by two nationally recognized organizations. Metro Christian middle and high school students have the opportunity to take one of 25 overseas missions trips that are offered each year. This distinction may indicate a cross-cultural awareness, an embracing of diversity, a good measure of self-confidence, and sensitivity to the needs of others.

After receiving permission from the IRB (see Appendices C, D, and E) and the public school’s Office of Accountability and Research (see Appendix H), the researcher proceeded to contact the three schools profiled in chapter 3 that fit the descriptions of the three school models required for the study (see Appendices A and B). The administrator of Swensen Middle School (pseudonym, public) agreed after meeting together and the Head of School and Principal at The Alpha Academy (pseudonym; private) consented
after phone calls and email exchanges. From the time of first receiving permission from the IRB to contact school administrators until the actual data collection began was six months. Once the administrators from the three schools agreed to participate in this study, arrangements were made to begin the first phase of data collection.

**Participants**

For this grounded theory study, a purposeful sampling of 10 to 15 middle school students was the goal, or until data saturation was achieved. The participants represented three different school models (public, private, and Christian) and all three middle school grades (sixth, seventh, and eighth). Middle school students responded to a one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K) during their homeroom class using a Google form, which asked about their experiences of teacher approachability when the students had questions for their teachers or needed their help. Students, who indicated they had experienced a lack of teacher approachability, were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix L) during their homeroom classes in order to narrow the pool of potential participants while seeking diversity in the sampling. The demographic questionnaire (see Appendix L) solicited information such as family structure, racial/ethnic/cultural dynamics, gender, disabilities, educational achievements of family members, birth order, and extracurricular interests. If a participant withdrew from the research study at any point, the process would have been repeated for soliciting additional participants until saturation of data was achieved. All participants selected their own pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout the study.
Procedures

This grounded theory qualitative study was conducted in different stages and settings. The administrators from three identified schools were emailed (see Appendix A) to request a brief meeting, in person, with the researcher for the purpose of presenting the research plan (see Appendix B). Once the researcher met in person with each administrator and received a verbal confirmation of participation, an application was submitted electronically to Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix C) as well as the public school’s Office of Accountability and Research (see Appendix H) in order to receive permission to proceed with formally contacting the identified middle schools. Once each IRB granted permission to proceed with the research plan, a follow up email was sent to each school’s administrator in order to set up a meeting to secure formal, written permission for their schools’ participation in the research study.

Once the administrators, from three approved schools, provided written permission and the researcher received their commitment to support the study, the researcher collaborated with each administrator to determine the most effective and efficient strategy for contacting middle school parents in their schools in order to solicit permission for their children to participate in the one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K) through a printed form. This question asked the students if they generally felt their current or former teachers were approachable or unapproachable for asking questions or getting help. Once this questionnaire was completed, data collection began in order to help identify students who indicated perceptions of teacher unapproachability. With the administrators’ permission, through the schools’
communication system, the parents of the potential participants were contacted in order to secure signed permission for their children to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix L).

Paper copies of the demographic questionnaire were distributed during the students’ homeroom classes for the purpose of determining a purposeful sampling of participants for the study. Diversity within the purposeful sampling was sought through the data provided in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2013). The commonality of the sampling was the shared perceptions of unapproachable teachers. Diversity was reflected in the dynamics of the participants. Saturation of data within the proposed 10 to 15 participants was sought in order to provide a clearer picture of a middle school-aged adolescent (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). If saturation was not achieved through the 10 to 15 participants, the researcher would have added to the number until saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). After four potential participants from each school were identified, permission to be interviewed was solicited from the proposed participants and their parents through paper forms sent home. The participants and their parents were asked to complete the permission form approved by the IRB and specific school (see Appendices F, H, I. and J) and distributed at each participant’s school. Once participation was granted, the researcher proceeded with the proposed data collection process. Students chose their own pseudonyms for the study. The researcher called each school’s administrator in order to determine the best date, time, and on-site location for the individual interviews. A follow-up email confirmed the agreed-upon logistics with the school’s administrator or designee.
Following the individual interviews (see Appendix M), the researcher called each school’s administrator to determine a date, time, and on-site location for the participants to be brought together in focus groups within each school in order to further explore the research questions and information already provided in the individual interviews. The individual interviews as well as the onsite focus group interviews (see Appendix N) were audio recorded by the researcher using a secured device. The researcher also personally transcribed all interviews in order to ensure data accuracy. After the focus groups met, students responded to writing prompts in journals (provided by the researcher) or an electronic wiki blog created by the researcher (see Appendix O). Students were encouraged to write in their journals or blog on their wikis when they were away from school, if possible. If participants chose to blog, their identities and responses were password protected to ensure their confidentiality. Participants responded to the researcher’s prompts about their perceptions of teacher approachability and how their perceptions and experiences influenced student-teacher interactions. Subsequently, the transcripts were coded (open, axial, and selective) using Atlas.ti software,(Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and by creating Excel spreadsheets. This data, along with the students’ journal/blog entries, provided the results of the research study.

The Researcher's Role

In my current role as head of school in a private Christian school in the north metro Atlanta area, I did not have any jurisdiction over any of the administrators, faculty, staff, students or parents in the three middle school sites. Through analyzing the data through questionnaires, individual and focus group interviews, journaling/blogging and analysis of the data, I remained the human instrument in this research study (Corbin &
Because of this, I bracketed myself in the process of analyzing the findings and writing the results according to the memos I made while collecting data. As the researcher, I was a facilitator of the students’ stories and recounting of their school experiences. The middle school model resonates with me personally and professionally as I savor opportunities to connect with students and teachers in this significant time of an adolescent’s life. My own recollections of the middle school years stir memories of uncertainty, lack of self-confidence, not fitting in with peers, sadness, and struggle.

Through my years as an educator, I have always relished opportunities to interact with middle school students, whether in a professional context or in a more casual one. I have challenged students to take God’s view of the masterpiece they are and to speak up for themselves as His creation (Psalm 139). By referencing my own philosophical assumptions previously mentioned, I attempted to identify my biases as I gathered and analyzed data for this study. Helping students find their voices, so to speak, is extremely important to me as a head of school in leading my team of educators. Additionally, equipping teachers to identify and meet the needs of my students is equally important. Thirdly, it was my hope that the findings in this study would also benefit parents as they guide their children through the middle school years.

**Data Collection**

Recognizing the value and integrity that triangulation affords, multiple methods of data collection were used (Creswell, 2013). To help guide the selection of diverse participants, middle schools students from three different school models were given a questionnaire of demographic data (see Appendix L) following the one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K). After identifying a diverse group of
participants from each school, and securing permission to proceed further, the participants were interviewed individually at their respective schools regarding four main areas of experience: their families of origin, their needs and differences, their relationships with their teachers, and their self-perception of self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy (see Appendix M). Following the individual interviews, students were gathered together within their own schools in focus groups in order to further explore their approach/avoidance experiences and tendencies (see Appendix N). The researcher then asked the students to either journal or blog their responses to questions provided by the researcher (see Appendix O). Their entries were kept confidential and secured through a locked container (journal) or a secure user name/password for those who blogged.

**Questionnaires**

After receiving permission from the IRB (see Appendices C and D), the one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K) were given to all middle school students in each school model (as approved by the school administrator). The question asked the students if they felt their current or previous teachers had been approachable or unapproachable whenever the students had questions or needed help. Subsequently, questionnaires were given to middle school students in the three identified schools who responded that they had previously experienced any aspect of teacher unapproachability. Middle school students’ answers to the following questions guided the researcher for selecting participants:
Questionnaire for Gathering Demographic Data (continued in Appendix L).

1. Name of student
2. Grade
3. Age
4. Gender
5. Ethnicity
6. Name the town or city where you were born.

7. Household composition (check all that apply):
   - Mother _____
   - Father _____
   - Siblings and ages ________________________________
   - Grandparent _____
   - Aunt _____
   - Uncle _____
   - Cousin _____

Diversity of participants within each school in addition to the total group of participants will be sought in order to collect rich data. Diversity includes gender, socio-economical dynamics, racial, ethnic, cultural, and learning differences and disabilities (Silverman, 2010). If additional students are needed to achieve saturation of data, the researcher will increase the number of participants for the study. The need for this increase will probably not become evident until the interview process is near completion (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Creswell, 2013).
Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants at their respective schools, during their school day, and according to their school schedule. Students and their parents signed consent forms (see Appendices F, G, I, and J) for participation in the interviews (Creswell, 2013). The students’ responses were audio recorded and secured to protect confidentiality (Creswell, 2013). For the purpose of establishing a rapport with the participants, a few minutes was spent with each student in order to build a measure of trust in moving forward. The entire conversation was recorded and transcribed. Since the researcher was unknown to all of the participants, modeling transparency was important if the students were expected to be transparent in return. The participants were provided with an overview of the interview, which was divided into four different categories to coincide with the literature review: family of origin, adolescent needs and differences, teacher-student relationships, and self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy.

Origins

1. Which parent (or family member) do you feel closest to and why?
2. Describe any differences you have noticed between your parents’ cultural upbringing and your friends’ parents.
3. When you were little and got hurt, whom did you typically go to for comfort?
4. What have your parents told you about their middle school teachers?
5. Who makes and who enforces the rules in your home?
6. When your family is together, what struggles or challenges at school do you discuss?
Adolescent Needs & Differences

7. In what ways should a student be able to feel safe in your school?

8. What would you recommend to a new student who wants to fit in to your school culture?

9. How are differences (gender, racial, interests, cultural, academic, maturity, preferences, etc.) generally viewed and treated at your school?

10. The word, “resilient” means to be able to recover from problems quickly. How resilient would you say you are in tough times? Can you give some examples of times you’ve had to be resilient?

11. How valued do you feel you and your ideas are when you’re at school?

Teacher-Student Relationships

12. If you were a teacher, what would you do to make sure your students knew that you liked them and that you were a safe person for them?

13. Imagine a teacher who you would approach and a teacher you would avoid. Give characteristics of both.

14. Mutual respect means that everyone shows proper respect for everyone else. How can a teacher encourage mutual respect in the classroom?

Self-efficacy, Self-determination, Self-advocacy

15. Describe yourself (your personality, your strengths and weaknesses, your friendship style…)

16. As a middle school student, to what extent do you feel you’re in control of daily decisions and your future direction?

17. What encourages you to speak up for yourself and why is it important?
18. If you see someone being picked on or bullied at school, what do you typically do?

Question seven in the Demographic Questionnaire and Interview Questions five and six addressed family dynamics and the participants’ interactions with family members. Each of these impact a student’s sense of belonging – first in his family of origin, then in other structured and unstructured groupings. The students’ sense of belonging within their family of origin satisfies an inherent need and prepares students for assimilating into other arenas where they might feel a sense of belonging (Danielsen et al., 2009).

Questions one and three explored the students’ sense of connectedness to their parents, which could have been transferred to others in authority in the school context depending upon the students’ degree of attachment to their parents (Ahern, 2006; Bradford et al., 2012; Branje et al., 2009; Kiner, 2009; Rishel et al., 2007). The Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides insight into a middle school students’ perception of their teachers in relationship to family of origin attachment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Dykas et al., 2010; Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2013). Question two examined any part that the parents’ culture and upbringing played in the students’ practices of approaching or avoiding their teachers or how conflict was handled (Feldman et al., 2010). Question four explored the students’ recollection of their parents’ middle school years and experiences, including their parents’ teachers (Williams, 2013).

Question eight addressed the participants’ perspectives of new students’ needs while entering the middle school years (Malti & Noam, 2008). The participants’ responses to this question provided insight for the researcher in understanding students’
perceived needs of others in this life stage, thus shedding light on the participants’ own needs. The range covered social, emotional, academic, and physical needs of students.

Question nine focused on a vast array of differences students might encounter in their relationships with one another including gender, racial, interests, cultural, academic, maturity, and preferences (LaRusso & Selman, 2011). For instance, typically, middle school boys and girls possess different expectations of their school experiences and relationships (Ahern, 2006; Karam, 2006; Riader-Roth et al., 2008). Acknowledging the differences and exploring the impact of met and unmet expectations provided insight into the approach/avoidance issue.

Whether or not students possess a sense of safety in every realm was the focus of Question seven. Physical safety is only one aspect of feeling protected during the school day. All students, and specifically middle school students, need to feel secure in their environments. That security includes emotional and social safety (Malti & Noam, 2008; Lane-Garon et al., 2012). This question also included the flow of the hallways and environmental structure of the classrooms (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Additionally, this question considered a student’s preferred working environment for comfort level and productivity (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005).

Question ten explained and assessed a student’s sense of resiliency in difficult situations and ongoing life experiences (Malti & Noam, 2008). Question eleven centered on characteristics of this generation of students. According to Tim Elmore (2010), today’s adolescents long for engaging in endeavors of significance and value. They want to feel as though they have inherent value within themselves and they bring value to other people and settings.
Questions twelve and thirteen focused on teacher-student relationships from the students’ perspectives. Teacher approachability as well as student tendencies to approach or avoid their teachers provided the data for this bank of interview questions (Danielsen et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Lyles, 2014; Matsumura et al., 2008; Saha, 2012; Wentzel, 1997). The students’ perspectives of the value of modeling mutual respect were explored through question fourteen (Matsumura et al., 2008).

Question fifteen explored the participants’ measure of self-awareness and self-perception in asking the student to describe themselves. Question sixteen pursued understanding of the participants’ sense of control over decisions that impacted them (Bandura, 1991; Bauer et al., 2009; Caprara et al., 2013; Danielsen et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; Sands, 2011; Sebag, 2010). Question sixteen further clarified the participants’ perspectives of how much their success in school rested in their hands (Danielsen et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Diseth & Samdal, 2014; Karam, 2006).

Question seventeen investigated the participants’ understanding and pursuit of demonstrating self-advocacy (Douglas, 2004). Finding one’s own voice to speak up for oneself or others is the main idea surrounding self-advocacy. Question eighteen was a critically important and potentially pivotal one as it focused on the students’ responses to someone being bullied (Danielsen et al., 2009; Milsom & Gallo, 2006).

**Document Analysis**

The only documents that required analysis were those created and authored by the participants. Authenticating the authorship of responses was conducted by receiving handwriting samples from participants prior to journaling data collection. Students, who
choose to blog, were given a specific user name and password and asked to keep their credentials confidential.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups within each school setting were gathered together once the individual interviews were conducted for the purpose of extending the discussion with the participants together with their peers. The interviews and the focus group discussions were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Interview and discussion questions were grounded in the literature and the purpose of each question was explained in the research study. Even though individual and focus group questions were prepared in advance, the possibility remained that the planned questions would need to be adjusted, dependent upon responses given. This was a clear advantage of a grounded theory qualitative study as the researcher attempted to thoroughly investigate the participants’ perspectives and experiences and continued asking questions until a point of saturation was reached.

**Focus Group Questions**

1. Which has been more fun for you – answering my questions about teacher approachability or getting out of class? Be honest!

2. Other than the interviews with me, can you remember a time when you’ve been interviewed in the past because someone wanted to know what you thought or felt about something? If so, tell me about that time.

3. As you’ve thought through the interview questions and considered the most important factors that make a teacher seem approachable, what do you think most middle school students would list as characteristics or actions?
4. Why do you think these specific factors make your teachers seem approachable? What about these factors connect with students?

5. Do you think there are teachers who view themselves as approachable and students would disagree with that perception? What could teachers do to understand students’ perceptions of teacher approachability so that teacher perception and student reality were the same?

6. If you needed to talk to a teacher about an academic or behavioral matter, would you ask your parents to help you know what to say to your teacher? Why would you ask or not ask your parents for help?

7. When a teacher seems approachable, how do you decide whether or not you will interact with that teacher regarding issues that are significant to you?

8. How does your personality type play into approaching or avoiding a teacher?

9. Have there been times when you thought a teacher was approachable, only to discover that wasn’t the case when you tried to enter into a conversation with that teacher? What happened, how did you feel, and how did that interaction impact your perceptions of teacher approachability?

The focus group questions were extensions of the interview questions and written for the purpose of expanding the students’ thinking around each of the topics. Providing an opportunity for the students to hear (or read) their peers’ responses was intended to help students better understand their own perspectives in light of others’ experiences. Common concepts and themes emerged through the collected data from the individual and focus group interviews (Creswell, 2013). In addition to recording the participants’ responses in the individual and focus group interviews, the researcher recorded memos of
observations made of the participants’ body language and expressions, including facial expressions and movements, aggressive or passive behaviors, and voice tones.

**Journaling/Blogging**

After collecting and coding the data from the interviews and focus group discussions, students were provided with journals or given the option to blog in order to capture their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences in relation to what they had expressed in previous conversations. Having the opportunity to think through their own perceptions of teacher approachability and how their perceptions and experiences influenced interactions with their teachers, the participants became more intentional and reflective of their actions. Journaling/blogging prompted recording of rich data for the research study. Participants were given prompts that helped them capture their thoughts as they evaluated teacher approachability through their own lenses and experiences.

**Journaling or Blogging Prompts**

1. Before your interview, what characteristics made you an avoider or approacher of teachers?
2. How do you feel you have developed a stronger tendency to approach or avoid your teachers whenever you have questions or concerns as a result of our interview and your awareness?
3. What could students do to help their teachers become more approachable?
4. What is to be gained and what is to be lost if students approach or avoid talking to their teachers?
5. If you were planning professional development for teachers at the beginning of the school year, what would you do to help the teachers with the approach/avoidance issue?

6. What do you want your parents or guardians to do to help you become better at self-advocacy?

7. What have you learned about yourself during your participation in this research study?

8. Do you feel you have acquired any life skills that will help you in high school, college, and your career or future?

**Data Analysis**

To provide as authentic and pure data analysis as possible, the researcher’s perspective was bracketed in the data collection and analysis process so that the participants’ voices and stories were heard. Bracketing was achieved through memos and references to philosophical assumptions. Interviews and focus group discussions were personally transcribed by the researcher then coded according to grounded theory coding. The three different types of coding (open, axial, and selective) in a grounded theory study helped the participants’ voices become stronger when similarities of experiences were conveyed. The specific software and method of coding was Atlas.ti Mac. Additionally, Excel spreadsheets were created to assist in the coding process. Coding of the participants’ journals and blogs were included in the triangulation of data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Individual and focus group interviews were recorded using a digital recording device, compatible with the transcribing software, and dedicated to the researcher’s
study. Following interviews in each school setting, the researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim and saved the data to a password protected laptop. A printed copy of each transcript was secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. The transcripts were coded utilizing the Atlas.ti program and using the same laptop previously mentioned.

**Open Coding**

The purpose of coding in a qualitative study is to provide guidance in identifying emerging and similar concepts or themes that the data provides. Open coding involves “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 195). This type of coding creates broad categories and ideas gathered through the data collection. In particular, the individual and focus group interviews initiated the open coding process. During this phase of analysis, the repetition of words, themes, and concepts communicated by each participant were captured and codes were assigned. Students’ actual words or phrases were coded – *in vivo* codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Considering such a multi-faceted topic as middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, and striving for diversity in the purposeful sample, it was anticipated that a large number of codes would be used in open coding. In fact, eighty-eight different codes of significance were identified. While searching for common words, themes and concepts, uncommon or outlier themes were not negated as unworthy for the study.

**Axial Coding**

Axial coding is “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 195). This coding process was particularly helpful in comparing and
contrasting the participants’ stories and experiences around the theme of teacher approachability. Similarities of factors that created a student’s perception of teacher approachability and influenced student-teacher interactions emerged in this stage of coding. From transcribing the interview scripts, using Atlas.ti. and Excel spreadsheets, coding patterns emerged from the collected data. Words, themes, and concepts commonly shared by the participants, were grouped according to their shared values.

**Selective Coding**

The third phase of coding in grounded theory data analysis is called selective coding. Creswell (2013) defines this coding as the “intersection of the categories to become a theory” (p. 85). Selective coding gives guidance in identifying the rhyme and reason of the rich data that’s been collected. The researcher’s quest, prompted by a hunch to be explained, leads to a theory, proposal, or hypothesis. Stepping back to analyze the data and codes from a big picture perspective helped in determining if any consistent patterns or perspectives emerged around student perceptions of teacher approachability and the influence perceptions had on student-teacher interactions. The researcher analyzed patterns of rhyme or reason for the students’ shared perceptions, which may have aligned with an existing theory or theories or perhaps pointed to a new or hybrid theory.

Open, axial, and selective coding were used to analyze all collected data through Atlas.ti and Excel spreadsheets – the individual interviews, the focus group interviews, and the students’ journal or blogging entries. Journal and blogging entries were coded at the conclusion of this stage of data collection. The students were granted their preference for venue of responding to the journal/blog prompts. The researcher created a Google
form that was password protected for those students who preferred this platform. The students were encouraged to enter their responses each evening when they were at home as opposed to during the day when they may have had distractions or others’ weighing in on their responses.

Analysis of the data collected provided guidance in assessing saturation of the data to ensure the topic had been explored as extensively as possible, within the scope of the study. In a qualitative study, a search ensues to unearth any part of a participant’s story that adds richness to the data and understanding to the phenomenon. If confidential information had been shared during the data collection process, the students’ confidentiality would have been protected in the manner agreed upon with the school administrator before the data collection process began.

**Trustworthiness**

For a qualitative study to be considered trustworthy, values such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability must be addressed within the study. For the amount of work required for a research study, clear details for the study’s credibility should be carefully scrutinized and the methods able to be duplicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study should demonstrate the characteristics of trustworthiness enough that evaluation of the work would be received favorably. A lack of authenticity of the data collection and analysis process or authorship of the study would invalidate the worthiness of the study.

**Credibility**

Credibility is increased by triangulation of data collection, prolonged engagement if required, member checks, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study,
different venues were provided for participants to relay their perspectives and experiences surrounding the focus of the research study (questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, journaling, and blogging). The questions were rooted in the literature and built upon each other from one type of data collection to another. Interview questions were open-ended such that a facilitator of the participants’ responses was needed, not a director.

**Dependability**

Dependability was addressed through reliability of the study as well as the data that was collected and analyzed. An audit trail was implemented to provide the assurance that the research study is a dependable one. Through the IRB process, the researcher was held accountable to follow the methods of research that were proposed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Because human instruments were used for the study, approval for each aspect was sought and granted and follow through was verified. No aspect of this qualitative, grounded theory study was unaccounted for nor conducted without prior approval. Therefore, the study offers dependability because of its procedures.

**Transferability**

When thick, rich data is collected and analyzed, a greater opportunity for transferability is possible. Other researchers may be able to take this research study and test it in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Educators may be able to apply the findings to their own schools and make appropriate application for the benefit of their school communities. There is the potential for great benefit to others when a research study is conducted in such a manner that people reap the reward through shared experiences and perspectives.
Confirmability

What might be assumed about a qualitative study versus a quantitative study is that the former is more subjective than the latter. Both approaches require data collection and analysis, but storytelling, which qualitative studies convey seems to connote a lesser measure of objectivity. Through the process of collecting rich data in a research-based manner, confirmation of the participants’ experiences and perspectives provided validation of authenticity and possibility of duplication of the study or application of the results in other contexts.

Ethical Considerations

In order to protect the identity of the participants and their settings, pseudonyms were used throughout the data collection, data analysis, providing the findings, and explaining the results. Data collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and journaling/blogging were kept confidential and secured in locked containers and/or password protected electronic files (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Before engaging in interviews or focus group discussions, permission was secured from the IRB as well as the site administrators and all proper approvals and consents/assents were obtained. Prior discussions with the school administrators were conducted in order to be prepared beforehand should any confidential information become known that might need the administrator’s attention. Appropriate protocol for disclosure that was proposed or approved by the site administrators was followed.

Summary

The third chapter of this research study outlined the specific methods that were employed in collecting data that guided the findings and results to answer the central
question: How do middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? A triangulation approach of data collection through individual participant interviews, focus group interviews, and participant journaling or blogging was implemented (Creswell, 2013). The data analysis for this grounded theory study used three types of coding – open, axial, and selective (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Trustworthiness of the methods employed was validated as credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable. Ethical considerations were given in order to provide verification of the participants’ stories and voices through privacy of settings, securing of data, and confirming confidentiality and anonymity of the data and participants.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This grounded theory, qualitative study focuses on middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and resulting actions based upon those perceptions when students want to talk to their teachers about school-related matters. Although previous studies explored aspects of the teacher-student relationship (Sands, 2011), teachers’ perceptions of their own approachability, and best practices of teachers for developing a sense of emotional safety for their students (Durlak et al., 2011; Lyles, 2014), there is a gap in research where the students’ own voices are heard on the subject of teacher approachability (Kauffman, 2013).

The focus of the central question for this research study is how middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers regarding school-related matters? Three research questions guiding this grounded theory study are: (a) how, if at all, do social constructs in school affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability; b) how, if at all, does home environment affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability; and (c) how, if at all, does the student-teacher relationship affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability?

This chapter is divided into three major sections: the first three phases of the data collection process, which includes descriptions of the participants in their school contexts; results from the last three phases of the data collection process, which include theme development and research question responses (where students’ responses reflect the emergent themes that answer the subquestions regarding the roles that social constructs, home environment, and student-teacher relationships play in middle school
students’ perceptions of teacher approachability); and summary of the findings for this study.

**Selection Process and Descriptions of Participants**

**Phase One: A One-Question Screening Questionnaire**

In order to begin determining the pool from whom participants were selected, a one-question screening questionnaire (see Appendix K) was given that asked students if they ever had a teacher they thought was unapproachable, either in the past or at their current school. This questionnaire was given to all sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students in the public, private, and Christian school models. The students in the public school were given the questionnaire at the beginning of their physical education classes. The students in the private school were given the questionnaire at the beginning of a middle school assembly, and the students at the Christian school during their Bible classes. The researcher was given the opportunity to introduce herself to the students and explain the research study to them. Additionally, an overview was provided of what would be expected of them if they were chosen to participate in the study. At that time, it was explained that those who were chosen to participate and who completed all three parts of the data collection would be given a $25 iTunes gift card. After collecting the students’ responses to the one-question screening questionnaire, the students were given consent forms to take home to their parents with the explanation that their parents’ and their own signatures were required in order to be considered as a participant. The consent forms were written for the students’ specific schools and according to IRB and the public school’s criteria (see Appendices C through J).
Phase Two: Participant Selection

According to each of the school’s timeframes, the researcher returned to collect the parent and student consent forms. Fourteen students returned the forms and were identified as the study’s participants. An interesting phenomenon was five of the fourteen students were also staff children in the schools where their parents worked.

Phase Three: Demographic Questionnaire

One of the goals of this study was to determine if there are themes or commonalities shared by sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade general education students from three different school models in the same north metro area regarding perceptions of teacher approachability. Within the body of participants, the desire for diversity was embedded as reflected in the demographic questionnaire. Diversity was being sought in gender, grade level, ethnic origin, family dynamics, birth order, parents’ education, languages spoken, number of schools attended, and any indication of a disability.

As shown in Table 1: Participant Demographics, from a total of fourteen participants, from three school models, there were eight girls and six boys, four sixth grade students, seven seventh grade students, and three eighth grade students. Two students identified themselves as African American, one Vietnamese, one Caucasian/Asian and ten Caucasian. In describing the family dynamics of their homes, ten indicated their parents are married, one student’s parents are divorced, another student’s parents are separated, and one student’s grandparents are rearing her. When asked about their birth order in their families, five students indicated they are the youngest children, one is in the middle of his siblings, three students are the oldest children, and five students are only children in their families.
Including their current school, the majority of students (six) stated their current school was their second school and three students stated it was their fifth school. All of the participants named a wide variety of extracurricular activities in which they engaged from athletic options to arts offerings, from team to individual competitions.

The vast majority of students’ parents completed a college degree (five mothers and seven fathers) and many completed graduate degrees (five mothers completed masters and two completed doctorates; six fathers completed masters degrees). Only two students indicated their mothers’ highest educational achievement was completion of high school and one father’s highest completion was high school.

For the majority of students, English was their first and only language (ten out of the fourteen participants). One of the student’s first languages was Vietnamese and another indicated her first language was French, having been born in Belgium. One student indicated he spoke English and another language, although he did not identify the other language.

The only students who indicated there was a diagnosis of a disability of any kind was a sixth grade boy (learning disability), a seventh grade girl (ADHD), and an eighth grade girl (anxiety). These sixth and seventh grade students attended the same school. Although their school does not describe or market itself as a school for special needs students, interaction with and observation of the students piqued the researcher’s curiosity about the types of students the school accepts and supports. The six students from this particular school displayed a measure of awkwardness, lack of confidence, and social awareness, unlike those participants from the other two school models. Diversity of participants was achieved and information was garnered through the demographic
questionnaire (see Appendix L).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family Dynamics</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Alpha Academy

**Anna.** Anna is an African-American eighth grade female who has attended four previous schools before her current one. She plans to go to public school after she completes this school year. Anna was born in England to parents of South African and English descent. She describes her mother as being strict because Anna’s grandmother was strict as well, having served in the military in South Africa. Anna acknowledges that her parents have very high expectations of her in school performance and behavior. She describes herself as being funny, easy to talk to, and sociable, yet not organized.

**Claire.** Claire is a sixth grade Caucasian female who has been reared by her grandparents since she was two months old. She clearly loves and admires her grandparents and appears to have a very good relationship with them. Claire relates that her grandparents have very few rules for her and she attributes that to her being “a good enough kid.” Claire enjoys the family and community feel in her school and thinks of her teachers like aunts and uncles because of the measure of comfortability that she experiences. Claire exhibits a confidence and self-assuredness beyond her sixth grade years.

**Maddie.** Maddie is a sixth grade female of European descent, with both parents born and reared in Belgium. She states she attended three other schools before her current school, where she has been six years. Maddie is very quiet in her responses, yet seems engaged with the interview process. She has two older brothers under whose shadows she seems to live when it comes to garnering the attention of her parents. Although she has attended The Alpha Academy longer than the other participants, she does not present as well connected to her classmates as the others seem to be.
Matthew. Matthew is a seventh grade Caucasian male and has attended only one other school before his current school. His father was born and reared in Scotland and later moved to Ireland and Matthew feels he is judged according to his ethnicity. He did not expound on what he means about students being “racist to my ethnicity.” Generally speaking, he does not feel that he or his ideas are valued by his classmates, but are by his teachers. He also expresses that his classmates do not “understand me,” particularly some girls in his class who he says have uttered hateful words towards and about him.

Pharrell. Pharrell is a sixth grade male student who noted his ethnicity as American; however, I would suggest that African-American is also part of his ethnic heritage. He indicated that he has been diagnosed with a learning disability of some kind. Pharrell attended two other schools before his current school and is completing his first year there. He is quite distracted by his parents’ recent separation and impending divorce, even though he states he does not want other people’s pity. Pharrell’s interview was the most challenging of all the participants, potentially reflecting other issues that came into play as he responded to the questions. Through his answers, he gives insight into his home life, his behaviors, his perspective, and his social skills.

Stella. Stella is a seventh grade Caucasian female who says she has been diagnosed with ADHD. Her current school is her fourth to attend and she is an only child. She said her parents were reared in very strict home environments and her parents have high expectations of her, but are more reasonable about their expectations and consequences. Stella says she is better friends with the boys in her class than the girls and often feels as though the girls do not like her. She expressed feeling valued because of her ability to work the school sound system and other technical equipment.
Metro Christian School

Bobby. Bobby is a Caucasian, seventh grade male student in the private Christian school. He has an older brother and has attended his current school for ten years. Of the four participants at his school, he is the only one who is not a staff child. Bobby admits that he does not like to ask anyone for help and also is persistent in getting projects done as quickly as possible. He acknowledges he is extremely disappointed and angry that he was not accepted into the National Junior Honor Society and said “it will not be good” if he is not accepted next year when he applies again, even though he will not ask anyone for help in filling out the application.

Fred. Fred is a Caucasian, seventh grade male student who has attended his current school for five years. His mother is also employed at the same school and he has a younger brother. Because his mother is a teacher, he is hesitant to talk about school matters unless he is sure she can keep a secret and will not mention the matter to anyone else. Fred presents as an easy going, compliant, friendly student who seems content to be in the background, yet is contemplative so as to have great observations and perspectives worth pursuing for deeper insight. The researcher took an extra few minutes to commend Fred for his friendly demeanor and welcoming countenance.

Leigh. Leigh is a Caucasian, eighth grade female student who has been diagnosed with anxiety and whose mother works at her current school, where she has attended five years. She has an older brother. Leigh is very quiet and demure, and answers the interview questions very differently than initially imagined. Leigh enjoys a wide variety of musical genres as well as playing video games competitively. Oftentimes, she experienced difficulty formulating answers to the interview questions and, admittedly, finding the exact words to express herself clearly.
Ricardo. Ricardo is a Caucasian, eighth grade male who has always attended his current school where both parents are teachers. He has an older brother and a younger sister. Ricardo answers the initial question of which parent he felt closer to with “it depends on who likes me the most at the time.” Also, when he was little and got hurt, he would always go to his dad for comfort because he would feel safer. If he talks to his parents about school-related matters, it is usually on the car ride to and from school, but his parents seem too tired and “they don’t care. It’s just them listening.” Ricardo indicated that his mom seems interested, but does not give much feedback or input.

Swensen Middle School

Cali. Cali is a sixth grade African-American female whose mother works at the school Cali attends. Cali indicates that she feels especially close to her mother, but talks to both of her parents about other students teasing her. Her parents’ counsel is to ignore the teasing or find her voice to speak up for herself. Cali is regularly in dramatic performances outside of her school and enjoys singing and dancing as well.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a seventh grade girl with Vietnamese parents who are divorced. Elizabeth expresses love for her father (who has remarried and with whom Elizabeth does not get along) and tension towards her mother (with whom she currently lives). Although it is often difficult to completely hear Elizabeth’s responses on the audio/visual recording, by the end of the interview it is recognized that she responds well to those who express genuine interest in her. The researcher encouraged Elizabeth to represent herself better by smiling more and expressing a friendlier, more welcoming and confident demeanor, noting she has much to offer classmates and others.

Jack. Jack is a seventh grade male student with Caucasian and Asian parents. He eagerly wanted to participate in the research study from the moment he first heard about
it. Jack states he had never been interviewed before and hoped he would have the opportunity to do so. Jack is an only child whose parents have very different cultural and religious backgrounds from each other. From his responses, he appears well informed about family dynamics and health struggles his family has experienced through the years. Jack seemed as though he had additional perspective to add to his responses, but withheld further comment when the researcher probed further.

**Sophia.** Sophia is a seventh grade Caucasian female whose father is the principal of the school she attends. She has previously attended four other schools, is an only child, and her mother is also an educator with her doctorate. Sophia appears to be confident and self-assured, seemingly unrelated to her father’s position at her school. Sophia did not dominate the interviews, but was well prepared with a ready answer when the researcher asked for her perspective or opinion. As an only child and the principal’s daughter, she exudes a sociable and engaging demeanor balanced with confidence and humility.

**Results**

**Theme Development**

Beginning with the theoretical framework of the Approach-Avoidance Conflict Theory, the Social Conflict Theory, the Attachment Theory, and the Social Cognitive Theory, threads of shared perspectives and experiences, conveyed through the participants’ responses, reflected a measure of understanding of human viewpoints and behaviors proposed by the theorists. Although the Social Conflict Theory provided the least amount of explanation for students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, the other three theories were evidenced in the research study and helped frame the investigation
into students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. Specifically, the Approach-Avoidance Conflict Theory and its distinctions clarified the approach-avoid tendencies of students in relation to social constructs in school, the home environment, and student-teacher relationships. The participants’ responses revealed these three factors did indeed influence student perceptions, which lead to the unveiling of the three major themes within these contexts. The participants did not specifically mention these themes or words, but their descriptors and recounting of their thoughts and feelings point to the emergence of these three specific overarching themes: awareness, communication, and relationships.

Students’ self-awareness, awareness regarding their teachers, and awareness of the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship are prevalent throughout the categories of questions and participants’ responses. Secondly, students’ responses are best encapsulated by the word “communication” as they describe the strengths and weaknesses of their interactions with their parents, classmates, and teachers. Finally, the third theme that reflects a direct correlation to awareness and communication is “relationships.” Specifically, the students’ perceptions of teacher approachability strengthen or hinder the student-teacher relationship. Each of the three themes has a direct correlation to the other two. For example, as the students express a greater sense of self-awareness, their communication skills strengthen and they are able to address matters of concern with others. As their communication skills improve, the students feel empowered to develop better relationships with others – in this case, their teachers. Subsequently, as the students develop better relationships with their teachers, their sense of self-awareness and other-awareness increases and the positive impact continues.
To illustrate the theoretical model for this grounded theory research study, Figure 1 provides a visual understanding of the process in which students engage as they determine whether or not they will take the risk in approaching their teachers regarding school-related matters. The shared objective is to receive help from their teachers with whom they enjoy a close, healthy relationship. Students must then assess whether or not their teachers are approachable – perceptions that are developed through social constructs at school, their home environments, and current and previous relationships with their teachers. The factors that strengthen or hinder student perceptions are self- and other-awareness, communication effectiveness, and the health of relationships.
Figure 1: Theoretical Model: Student Awareness and Risk Assessment
Theme 1: Awareness. When the participants were asked about safety at school, some immediately described the measures taken to ensure their physical safety, some described emotional and social safety they experienced with their teachers and classmates, and others asked the researcher to explain what was meant by “safety.” Anna explained safety is, “getting to know everyone. Knowing how everyone reacts to everything so then you know what to do and what not to do.” She responded that this applies to both teachers and classmates. Pharrell talked about a sense of safety by feeling accepted in his current school in contrast to his previous school. Stella mentioned “having people you can trust and teachers who hug and care about you.” On the other hand, Matthew suggested he would have a fire extinguisher and a phone to call for help if he was a teacher and safety was threatened. Jack relayed going through an F4 tornado at one time and not feeling safe in his current school because of the amount of glass all around.

As the individual interviews continued, the participants’ responses provided more examples of awareness (self- and other-) emerging as a major theme in explaining middle schools students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. The students’ descriptions of approachable teachers were so closely aligned, there were no distinctions made that reflected differences in grade levels, school models, gender, ethnicity, birth order, family dynamics, disability, personality, or being a staff child. The participants used words and phrases such as “kind, friendly, welcoming, funny, tell about their families and their lives, change teaching styles, understanding, know what is going on in students’ personal lives, smile, and ask students individually if they need help.” Conversely, the students described teachers they avoid as “strict, do not like me, make me feel like an idiot when I
ask a question, frowns, no sense of humor, hurts my feelings and crushes my spirit, yells, uncomfortable to be around, distant, closed off, frustrated with students, sits at the teacher’s desk rather than moving around, gets mad if you don’t agree with their opinion, gets mad, and serious all the time.”

When the students were asked if they speak up for themselves or others should the need arise, their answers varied slightly, not due to awareness of the need as much as feeling empowered to do so. Anna and Cali acknowledged their mothers encourage them to speak up for themselves and Claire stated she does, “while also giving someone the benefit of the doubt to explain their behaviors and attitudes.” Stella appears to have a high sense of self-awareness and resiliency. She does not hesitate to speak up for herself, especially if she is convinced she is right about a matter. Bobby will speak up for himself because “you don’t want other people to argue for you and you need to learn to deal with your problems.” Leigh affirmed that she speaks up for herself because “it frustrates me when people think that their opinions are the right way.” She differentiated between matters of truth and matters of opinion. Ricardo agreed that he does speak up for himself because “if you don’t speak up for yourself, people will just take control of you and you can’t do anything about it.” Matthew acknowledged that he often speaks up for himself in situations involving other students, but not with teachers.

The participants were challenged to put themselves into their classmates’ shoes and imagine how teacher approachability might be described. Their responses included, “step-by-step walkthroughs, nice, careful, comfortable around you, can help you grow, help you with things you don’t get.” The students at Swensen Middle School also noted that most of their teachers are female, but their experiences made them believe that male
teachers are more upbeat and kind than female teacher. Jack added, “people treat people the way they want to be treated” when asked why the noted characteristics of teacher approachability were particularly important. Claire shared a teacher should be fair to all, not just a particular group of students. Matthew said an approachable teacher “doesn’t discourage us in class, like yell at us, or talk bad about something. Also, they would seem nice and have a smile on their face, always being sort of happy to know you’re there.” Anna added if a teacher is “laid back and stuff so they seem more calm, it’s just easier.” Claire weighed in, “if the teacher notices like girl things, like a haircut, or you got like your ears pierced or something like that.”

When asked who should initiate movement towards the other, the teacher or student, Anna responded the student should make the move, “because like the teacher can’t know everything like how you feel and stuff.” Matthew reflected, “I feel like the teacher should want to draw you in as well as you want to connect with them.”

An interesting observation led to further probing about a person’s (specifically a teacher’s) emotional quotient (EQ). When asked what teachers could do to become more approachable to their students, the participants suggested, “getting to know every student better one-on-one and learn from students about being approachable by the way they act.” Wanting to explore this further, the idea of EQ as explained and how it would apply in a teacher-student context. Then, the students were asked how a teacher might be able to gain a clear picture of how he or she comes across to the students. Jack suggested asking “the kids what they think about their teacher and have the kids suggest ideas.”

The next question was the pivotal question of the study and provided even greater insight to this specific theme. The specific focus of this research study was capsulized in
the question: How do you decide whether or not you will interact with a teacher regarding issues that are important to you? How do you decide whether or not you actually will go to a teacher? Jack responded, “I see how she reacts to other kids.” Cali added, “I see if she’s in a bad mood.” Elizabeth said, “I see if she’s really busy and grading our work and if she’s ok with me asking questions.” Sophia tests the water first by asking the teachers if they are comfortable with her asking a question to “see what they say first.” The students agreed there was little connection between their own personalities as introverts/extraverts and whether or not they approached a teacher about a school-related matter. They all agreed that more depended upon the teacher’s personality than the student’s. Cali said, “If they’re fun and nice, I would feel comfortable talking to them, but not if they’re mean and serious.” Bobby noted then a teacher is considered trustworthy, it is easier to talk to them. Ricardo made an interesting observation when he stated that some teachers interact with some students better than with others so may be perceived as more approachable to some students because of that.

In response to the question about how teachers could assess students’ perceptions of teacher approachability in comparison to teachers’ own perceptions of approachability, Fred suggested the teachers could “do like an anonymous survey asking ‘do you think I’m approachable?’ then change their mindset according to what the majority of the students say.” Leigh suggested sometimes it is a teacher’s personality that comes across as unapproachable, particularly to students whose personality is very different from the teacher’s. Ricardo quipped often times the teachers do not like or agree with the students’ feedback and comments on the surveys given at their school every year. He expanded his comments with, “Like I’ve heard teachers get mad if students indicated the
teachers are unapproachable and say, ‘well, I’m approachable, I think I’m approachable.’ It’s based on experience.’ Leigh added, “They may get a little offended or like, ‘I thought I was better than that. I thought the kids liked me.’” When I asked the participants how their teachers should respond to the feedback, Fred said his mom does not really care what the students say. “She’s just there to teach and help her family.” He then added, “Well, she does care what they think, but it’s mostly like, if you have a problem with me, talk to me about it and we can find out a way that you cannot have a problem with me.” Leigh continued with,

There are a couple of kids that go extremely ‘I hate this teacher. She or he is the worst. They teach horrible. I can’t approach them at all,’ and stuff like that. They over exaggerate this because they’ve had bad experiences, but that’s not always the case.

Ricardo offered his mother does not really care what the students say “unless they like take it into action and be like disrespectful. She doesn’t care if you don’t like her, but if you start copying her and like mocking her she’ll get mad.” The researcher went off script at this point to identify with and encourage the staff kids, recognizing that it must have been difficult for them at times when students made unkind comments about their parents. Matthew responded, “They can talk to the student and they can ask questions like, ‘do you think I’m approachable? Do I seem like I can be? Or am I just too mean?’ Or something like that.” Claire disagreed, “Well, I don’t think that a teacher would be straightforward.” Pharrell proposed a teacher could gather information just by body language and Anna expressed agreement, “yea, by body language and if a teacher seems more laid back and is kinda more on the level with the kids then the kids can ok,
the teacher is approachable.” Other ideas proposed for how a teacher could know how her students perceive her approachability is the transition from one environment or classroom to another. If students “groan when coming into that one teacher’s classroom, but are happy when he steps out,” Pharrell proposed and maybe the teacher would see the problem lies with him or her.

Fred stated he was not comfortable confronting people or situations, whether it is his peers or a teacher. He indicated he had a hard time speaking up in front of the class if he needed help, so he will just sit in the back and not say anything. When probed further as to this being his own personality or because of who the teacher is, or because he is a teacher’s kid and he puts himself in the teacher’s shoes, he stated it sort of depends on the teacher, but I’m still a little hesitant with all teachers.” Leigh continued with explaining her hesitancy in asking questions when it might seem everyone else knows and understands and she is the only one with a question. Fred and she both stated they did not want to interrupt the class by asking questions. Maddie expressed concern that a teacher might tell others or bring others into something you wanted to only discuss with that teacher. She conveyed it was a risk she would not take. Claire added an example from the beginning of the year when she asked the teacher if she could ask a couple questions. The teacher told her to go back to her desk and finish her work, and that she could not ask questions. She commented the teacher seemed to be unapproachable already, but thought she would venture asking. She added, “I felt kinda awkward um when these things would happen, I’d get this like twist in my stomach and I’d feel really awkward and I’d sit back down.” She said she would try to approach the teacher after that
but it would end up the same way. A final illustration of a student’s awareness of teacher approachability – or the lack of – was given when Maddie added her own perspective,

I think it makes it difficult if you like ask a question and they say no, but the person before you or after you like kinda seems like they like the other person more so they like answer the question like during a test or for homework or during a quiz so it like it kinda makes it difficult because you ask the exact same question but they don’t answer and help someone else. It affects you a lot because you’re kinda like well why won’t you help me with more difficult work?

Cali, along with many of the other participants, stated they had acquired greater confidence in approaching their teachers about school (or personal) matters since participating in the study. Even those teachers they previously considered unapproachable had become less intimidating in their minds. If Cali were given the opportunity to plan professional development for teachers, she would include role-playing activities where the teachers had to take turns playing the part of students and the teachers would help each other learn to become more approachable. Jack also suggested professional development that would help teachers with their daily attitudes and how they react. Sophia expressed she had gained a greater awareness of her teachers and what kinds of teachers she has. She also agreed with Cali’s suggestion of planning role-playing for professional development. Fred had an interesting suggestion for professional development plans. He would advise to be more respectful all the time, not just when other teachers were around, be more excited to teach, and more inviting towards students.

Ricardo offered another twist regarding self-awareness and awareness of teacher approachability. He believes students also need to demonstrate approachability to their
teachers in order to increase the mutual approachability factor. Since the interviews, Stella has gained confidence in asking questions, become more reasonable, and more comfortable around strangers. She also reflected that she is challenged to be more confident in herself and her thoughts, and to be more responsible, courageous, and helpful.

**Theme 2: Communication.** As the participants described aspects of awareness, even though that was not the term they used, they also provided narrative about their interactions with teachers and classmates. As approachable teachers were described and imagined, the styles and verbiage of communication were the focal points. These teachers expressed to their students how much the students and their ideas were valued, including their opinions, are as well. Stella noted the model of one of her current teachers “who loves to enter into conversation with the students about their lives.” Fred stated he would “try to talk to my students individually and would get to know my students at the beginning of the year and where they’re coming from, what they like to do, and how they learn” if he was an approachable teacher. Adding more insight, in order to communicate he was a safe person for his students, he would tell them about his own family if he had a wife and kids, about his background, and anything else about himself as he “let my guard down a little bit to let them know about me and where I’m coming from.” Regarding the importance of communication, Leigh weighed in with her descriptions of an approachable teacher, which included “funny, open, wanting students to ask questions and talk to their teachers more, have a relationship with students beyond teaching, and not talk down to the students.”
Ricardo’s perspective was articulated clearly as he would tell his students to come to him if they were struggling with anything and he would help them. He added an approachable teacher, “wouldn’t mock you for saying whatever you said to them or you can say whatever you feel like you can say, whatever you want to them and they would understand it.” Elizabeth referenced going through tough times at home and acknowledged some of her teachers “understand what I’m going through and they agree with me in some parts.” These sentiments tied into her response in thinking of herself as a teacher students would approach. She said, “A teacher that’s really funny, like has a very nice personality, and you can like talk to when you’re down.” Jack added, “A teacher who says, ‘We can work on that’ and kind of walks me through what I’m having trouble with.” Sophia suggested it is important for the sake of good communication and connection for a teacher to pursue a one-on-one conversation with students. Her description of an approachable teacher is one who is “really nice, like approachable to anyone and also like talks to me” and lets her know she is a top priority. Intentionally pursuing effective communication, in turn, strengthens the student-teacher relationship.

In their focus groups, the students described the types of communication they appreciated having with their teachers. The participants used words and phrases such as, “upbeat, honest, want to learn from their mistakes and what they weren’t getting.” Wanting to know their thoughts on what might happen if a teacher asked for input, the students gave it, but the teacher’s response was such that the students never wanted to offer suggestions again, what did the students think would destroy that dialogue? Jack said, “She’d start yelling at them, saying, ‘That’s wrong! I know what I am!’” and Cali said the teacher would be mean. Elizabeth added the teacher would tell “the kids to go
outside for no reason.” Sophia injected, “… like do the opposite of what they said and
tell them that they’re wrong and like, ‘No, I’m patient, you guys just don’t realize it.’”

On behalf of other middle school students, Metro Christian School participants
proposed teacher approachability characteristics would include being “nice, open to
receiving questions, and can have a conversation with them making them seem more
approachable.” Ricardo suggested, “If you feel like you ask them a question, they won’t
act like it’s a stupid or dumb question.” How teachers respond to students’ questions
increases or diminishes the sense of approachability. Bobby added, “Probably if they tell
you like about their life” and Ricardo added, “Yeah, being a little brother.” Leigh
included, “more relatable” and Fred proposed, “If they try to, they approach you also, so
it’s not you just coming up and talking.” Leigh affirmed there are teachers at her school
he feels comfortable talking to about anything and feels they can relate to her on any
topic.

The next questions focused on whether or not they would ask their parents for
help or advice if they were struggling with something in school. They all acknowledged
their parents would tell them to talk to the teachers, but they were mixed in whether or
not they would ask their parents for help in knowing what to say. Elizabeth’s parents are
Vietnamese and she felt as though they would not be of much help because of the
language barrier. The researcher asked if her parents would have principles to offer to
her such as being respectful and look the teacher in the eyes and she affirmed they would
suggest such things. Leigh also said she was glad that her mom worked in the junior high
because she would have good advice on how to approach specific teachers. Ricardo
offered he would “just go to my brother because he’s gone through middle school and
stuff, so I just like ask him what he would do.” Fred said, “cause my mom works here. She knows the other faculty well, so I can ask her like what would she say if, what would he or she say if I asked them this. And she’ll help me with that.” In contrast, the participants at The Alpha Academy were in agreement. They probably would not seek their parents’ help or counsel in knowing how to approach a teacher about an issue if the need arose. They felt they should handle such matters themselves and not bother their parents. They stated their parents had prepared and equipped them to approach their teachers if necessary.

When asked if there had ever been a time the students did not want to talk to a teacher, they all answered affirmatively. Upon further explanation, they reasoned the teacher was “unapproachable, mean, rude to everyone around them, and says they’re busy when they’re actually not.” Jack said the teacher might yell at him and give him a referral. Sophia proposed the teacher might “change grades a little bit. Like she might not be honest about your grades.” Leigh recounted a time she asked a teacher to explain something and the teacher gave the same explanation and said the same thing she had previously – and she still did not understand. Fred and Ricardo offered examples of similar situations they had experienced. Ricardo felt as though the teacher did not take his questions seriously and simply dismissed him without answering. Claire conveyed the size of the problem was a major factor in addition to the teacher’s approachability. Anna agreed if it was something “really bothering you and you can’t forget about it, just go and get it over with and talk to the teacher.” Claire expressed really brave kids “… don’t need a reason, they just go up and ask.” Anna stated going to the teacher if you had a bad grade would communicate to the teacher you really cared and wanted help.
For Claire, professional development ideas would include telling the teachers “to be nicer to the kids and to stop yelling over stupid things.” Stella believes, “Students will be able to ask questions more if they learn to approach their teachers.” Anna’s suggestion for professional development would be helping the teachers to be “more kind and open.” Leigh proposes students need to spend more time talking to their teachers to help them become more approachable. Sophia added a caveat to that suggestion by acknowledging a measure of approachability on the teacher’s part is essential. Bobby stated, “it helps if you share information with your teachers because sometimes it’s just good to tell someone something. The only thing that could be bad with that if you can’t trust your teacher with the information that you want to share.” Elizabeth believes students can help teachers become more approachable if the teachers really want to know – and if the students will be honest. Cali would risk letting teachers know how she really feels because, from her perspective, more can be gained than lost by taking such a risk.

**Theme 3: Relationships.** Anna stated she would “be laid back so they would know they could come to me about anything” if she was a teacher. Claire’s description of a good student-teacher relationship means, “They can sort of be like your best friend.” Maddie was more concerned about the confidentiality of a student-teacher relationship in stating, “they won’t say anything to like anyone else, I guess to any of the other teachers. You’re able to talk to them anytime you need, but that’s kind of hard since the teacher’s got to work.” If Bobby were a teacher, he would “… try to be a friend and a teacher and teach them while being nice to them and taking into consideration their ideas.” Ricardo responded, he would “… try to build relationships with my students, be nice to them, and
invite them to like talk to me if they feel uncomfortable about anything.” He also feels closer to those teachers who are also his parents’ friends.

With the individual interviews being the first questions the students considered about teacher approachability, their responses are considered the freshest of data in the collection process. Their answers were candid, cohesive, and aligned with one another as they conveyed their perspectives and shed light on how their perspectives of teacher approachability were developed. The participants’ self-awareness and other-awareness influenced their communication with their teachers, which strengthened their relationships, remained status quo, or even hindered their relationships further. However, even with the students’ descriptions of teachers they would avoid or angst expressed regarding their relationships with their teachers, all of the participants expressed a desire to feel connected to their teachers and to enjoy a healthy and close student-teacher relationship.

Keeping in mind the students already expressed a desire to have positive relationships with their teachers during their individual interviews, their responses to the focus group interview questions revealed more of the same. Probing about whether or not a teacher had changed their minds about approachability from the beginning of the school year, they agreed that it had happened, but more from a positive perspective of the teacher to a negative experience. The students admitted they enjoyed a closer relationship with some teachers more than others and those relationships helped in the approachability factor. However, Fred gave an example that was contrary to his expectation. Fred explained having a relationship outside of the classroom with a teacher, such as a coach, or club sponsor, or other extracurricular activity, increases the
sense that a teacher is approachable, but that proved to be a wrong assumption when he
needed help in the teacher/coach’s class and Fred felt he was treated like any other
student. He was not looking for any special favors, only receiving help in light of the
special teacher/coach relationship he thought he had. Fred also added, “If it’s a teacher I
don’t really connect with, it’s harder to go up after class and ask a question.” Leigh
chimed,

Well, it happens to me, too. Because like certain teachers I can go and I feel
completely fine approaching and sometimes it depends on the question but
usually I feel like there’s a couple teachers I’m fine talking to like I have a regular
conversation and like feel like it’s talking to my friend or something.

Ricardo’s situation is unique in that his parents have been long-time friends with many of
his teachers. He feels comfortable approaching his teachers about school-related matters
because of the special relationship he enjoys with his teachers.

When asked what makes a teacher comfortable to approach, Anna responded,
“You know how sometimes you can just have good conversations with a teacher?” Stella
and Anna agreed, “They understand you.” In response to my asking if they liked it when
teachers told personal stories about themselves, they all affirmed they did. Matthew
stated it made class time more interesting, Claire said the stories told more about the
teachers, and Pharrell quipped, “We didn’t know.” Matthew added, “We get to know
them better.” Claire shared, “… like it might remind someone of their friend or
something.” Stella added, “family” and Matthew said, “It would make the student be able
to understand and feel comfortable.”
When asked what, if any, was gained through their participation in the study, their responses were affirming with only a couple exceptions of those who felt nothing had been gained. Through her participation in this study, Sophia stated she has learned she needs to “… get involved instead of expecting others to come to you. Get involved with the class and your teachers.” Matthew gleaned from the interview process the importance of developing better relationships with his teachers. For a professional development plan, Leigh proposed, “I would tell teachers to spend time with students individually so they can get to know them.” She also admitted, “I need to try to make connections with teachers who aren’t willing to try to make a connection with me.

All data collection took place over a very short period of time at the end of the school year, all transcribing of the data was done subsequent to completion of this phase. The researcher transcribed each of the individual and focus group interviews, and journal/blog entries personally, upon recommendation of the dissertation committee, and was ultimately thankful for their wisdom in doing so. Watching the recordings, hearing the participants’ voices, and observing their mannerisms, was a fresh reminder of the value of the students’ perspectives and their individual designs.

The audio/video recordings were downloaded onto a MacBook Air laptop from the recording device, which was borrowed from the researcher’s school. To help the transcription process, the software, F5 Transcription Standard, was purchased, which facilitated better control of the speed and volume of the recording as the data was transcribed into Word documents, thus making the process flow more smoothly. After all transcribing was completed, all documents were uploaded into Atlas ti. Additionally, the researcher created Excel spreadsheets to capture the demographic information in
conjunction with the interview and journal/blog questions, along with the participants’ responses for the purpose of coding through Atlas ti. Eighty-eight codes of any significance were captured through Atlas ti. From this initial process of open coding, the next step was to identify any shared concepts (axial coding) the participants’ were expressing through their responses to the interview and journal questions. This phase of analysis was conducted manually and digitally in order to clearly understand what the participants were communicating. Finally, through selective coding, three predominant themes were noted that captured the essence of the students’ stories about teacher approachability: awareness, communication, and relationship. As previously stated, there was inherent diversity in the selection of participants, yet common themes emerged even more strongly than anticipated.

As outlined in Chapter Two, the theoretical framework for this research study included the Approach/Avoidance Conflict Theory, the Social Conflict Theory, the Attachment Theory, and the Social Cognitive Theory. Imagining what theories might help explain students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, these specific theories were researched and proposed as potential considerations. However, since a gap in the body of research was identified, perhaps a new theory or hybrid of existing theories would offer a clearer explanation for students’ decisions about whether or not to approach teachers concerning school-related matters based upon their own perceptions if the students’ own voices and explanations were heard.

Upon further analysis and synthesis of the data, along with recognition of the three emerging themes, the theoretical framework in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the findings in this study. The participants consistently expressed their
desire to feel comfortable in asking their teachers for help when needed as well as to feel connected to their teachers through strong and healthy relationships. The initial factor for students in determining whether or not they would approach their teachers about school-related matters is awareness – self-awareness, the students’ awareness of their teachers’ approachability factors, and the students’ perspectives of teachers’ perceptions of their own approachability. To illustrate the significance of students’ perceptions of the strength of their relationships with their teachers (proximity) and students’ awareness of teacher approachability factors, Figure 2 conveys the analysis students employ as they decide next steps in approaching their teachers. The students’ sense of self-awareness, awareness regarding teacher dynamics, and perceptions of teachers’ self-awareness, in conjunction with students’ assessment of their relationships with their teachers result in students calculating the risk of approaching their teachers.
Students' Perceptions of Teacher Approachability

Figure 2: Student Awareness: Proximity in Relationships and the Risk Calculator.

Research Question Responses

Central question. This research study began with answering the question: How do general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability influence the students’ interactions with their teachers? Using a grounded theory design helped to guide the researcher towards finding an explanation of how students develop their perceptions and then act upon those perceptions when they need to talk to a teacher
about school-related matters. This gap in the research was the impetus for engaging in the research study.

**Subquestion one.** Examining whether or not social constructs in school affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability is the focus of this subquestion. In order to determine what, if any, impact social constructs might have as students develop their perceptions of teacher approachability, specific questions were crafted to pose to the students in order to glean understanding for this particular research question. The first question that began to provide some insight asked the participants how someone could feel safe in school. As previously noted in this chapter, some of the participants thought immediately of physical safety and did not think of emotional/social safety as their understanding of being safe at school was probed further. Other students immediately referenced emotional/social safety with friends and teachers. Additional questions that investigated the possibility of social constructs at school having any affect on students’ perceptions of teacher approachability included questions about how a new student could fit into their school (“I’d tell him to just be him and hang out with my friends and me”), how differences of all kinds are viewed at their schools (not a significant factor at the three schools according to the participants), how valued did they feel they and their ideas are to their teachers and classmates (mostly valued by teachers and about half valued by their classmates), seeing themselves as others do by describing themselves (many described their personalities, and few described their strengths and weaknesses though prompted), examining whether or not they feel they are in control of their present lives and future direction (a resounding affirmation to both), and finding their voices to speak
up for themselves and others more confident to do so; and all encouraged by their parents to speak up for themselves; many expressed hesitancy in speaking up to a bully).

In answer to Subquestion One, do social constructs in school affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, the researcher submits certain social constructs have a direct impact, and others have a secondary affect. For example, how a teacher conveys safety to her students – both physical and social/emotional – will have a direct impact on the students. Additionally, how a teacher handles differences, such as racial, gender, learning, and cultural, will directly affect the students and potentially influence the way students view and treat differences as well. A teacher’s demonstration of valuing a student and his or her ideas has a direct impact on a student’s perception of teacher approachability. As a secondary affect, the teacher also models valuing others to the rest of the class. A teacher should regularly communicate to students their ability to exercise great control over the daily affairs of their lives and the direction of their future. These are a few examples that social constructs in school do affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. The three major themes of self- and other-awareness, communication, and relationships are noted throughout the students’ responses around topics of social constructs and their impact on perceptions of teacher approachability.

Subquestion two. The last group of the individual interview questions focuses on self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy. Before a person – in this case, a middle school student – is able to demonstrate strength in any of these, he or she must first possess a strong and accurate sense of self-awareness, which brings the focus back to the beginning: Origins. Through a child’s identity with and attachment to the parents or primary caregivers, a healthy sense of self begins to develop. The child learns
communication skills from the moment of birth, through childhood, and into the challenging times of adolescence. Self-perception and self-awareness help to shape and mold how the child will engage and interact with others. The child’s parents or first caregivers help develop a sense of awareness of self and others, in conjunction with the first words and movements of communication as relationships begin to be forged.

Asking the participants to describe their relationships with their families (which parent they felt closer to and to whom they went when they were hurt) and describing their friends’ families forced them to articulate perspectives about themselves and others. Thinking of the rules in their homes, who makes them and who enforces them, (all answered both to both questions) enforced a sense of unity in their families. When asked if they would seek their parents’ advice if they needed to talk to a teacher the participants were divided in their responses (most would ask but a few did not feel they needed their parents’ help). The participants expressed a healthy respect for their parents and, for the most part, seemed to enjoy a good relationship with them (because their parents had divorced, Pharrell and Elizabeth were not in a good place with their parents). To answer this question of whether or not the home environment affects students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, the question is answered affirmatively, based on three specific perspectives: a) the home is where a child first develops a sense of self-awareness, self-identity, and awareness of others; b) the home is where a child’s communication skills first begin to develop; and c) the home is where a child first experiences relationships and how relationships work. An adolescent brings all of the self- and other-awareness understanding that has been gleaned (and perhaps intentionally taught), communication skills, and relationship skills to school every day. A sense of awareness and acquired
communication and relationship skills help form a middle school student’s perceptions of
teacher approachability.

**Subquestion three.** Most certainly, the student-teacher relationship has a direct
impact on a middle school student’s perception of teacher approachability and the focus
of the interview and journaling/blogging questions sought to answer the “how” of this
subquestion. Asking the students to provide descriptions of an approachable teacher and
a teacher one would avoid provided insight to the students’ perspectives of their
relationships with their teachers. If they felt close to their teacher, then they were more
likely to approach if they had a concern about a school-related matter. However, if they
did not feel they had a good relationship with a teacher, they would not feel comfortable
asking questions or seeking help. One opposing example was offered where a student
felt close to a teacher coach, only to be treated differently than expected when help was
needed. The student expressed a sense of disappointment this happened to him.

All of the participants expressed a desire for their teachers to be more welcoming,
more cheerful, more fun, more relational, tell more personal stories, and pursue the
students to offer help. The students even offered ideas for how teachers could improve
their approachability through professional development and honest and candid
conversations with their students and their principals. There was no lack of ideas for
improvement, nor the desire to be the beneficiaries of change. In short, the students
wanted to have a close relationship with their teachers, which in turn would help their
perceptions of teacher approachability, and make it easier to ask questions and express
concerns.
The influence of social constructs in school, a student’s home environment, and student-teacher relationships on middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability is illustrated in Figure 3. The research shows that all three play a role in the development of student perceptions as well as influencing actions taken as a result of perceptions. The three major themes of awareness, communication, and relationships are fostered by these factors of influence on student perception. Through the participants’ own voices, they have reiterated their heart-felt desires to feel connected to their teachers and to feel comfortable to ask them for help. In most cases, the teacher’s approachability is the determining factor in swaying the perceived risk in doing so.

Figure 3: Influences That Affect Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability
Summary

Upon embarking on this journey of data collection and analysis, the researcher was convinced the research study was a worthy one that would provide insight into educators’ questions through the years. What seemed like an anomaly about students’ perceptions of their teachers (being an educator, from a family of educators, and whose closest friends are educators) became clearer to the researcher through time spent with the participants, and even more so while analyzing the collected data. Although an educator for over thirty years, many of those years spent with middle school students, the big picture of perceptions of teacher approachability was not fully understood, nor students’ understanding that would help them overcome or balance out those perceptions.

Through spending time with the participants one-on-one in their individual interviews, bringing them together in focus groups to see how their responses and perceptions might change (which they did not), and reading their journal/blog entries when they could write anything they wanted (since they probably would not see the researcher again), their stories became special treasures, which had been entrusted with their perspectives and insights, as well as other middle school students they represented. Theirs was a sacred trust that would be honored and their stories would be used for the benefit of other middle school students and teachers. The extra bonus to this research study was the participants’ acknowledgements that the data collection process had already helped them adjust their behaviors in approaching their teachers, even those they had not previously viewed as approachable.

In summary, middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and the influence of those perceptions on student-teacher interactions begin with their sense
of awareness, which is critically important in effective communication, and that being the foundation of strong relationships. The development of awareness, communication skills, and strong relationships is an ongoing process, started at home (home environment) and fostered at school (social constructs), so the student-teacher relationship grows stronger with time and students’ reality align more consistently with teachers’ self-perceptions of approachability.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to investigate general education middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and how their perceptions influence interactions with teachers. From the onset of researching relevant theories and pertinent literature through the data collection and analysis process, the researcher’s ultimate goal is understanding the factors that affect students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and the factors that determine whether or not the students will approach their teachers about school-related matters. This chapter consists of five additional sections: (a) a summary of the findings, (b) a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant theories and literature, (c) methodological and practical implications, (d) delimitations and limitations of the study, and (e) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

In an attempt to understand potential factors that help shape students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, three different dynamics were proposed and became the focus of subquestions for the research study. Subsequently, these three major and common themes emerged and are woven throughout the students’ responses to the interview questions: awareness, communication, and relationships. The first subquestion focused on examining whether or not social constructs in school played any part in developing students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. The students’ sense of physical and emotional/social safety in school was a factor that influenced students’ perceptions. Additionally, how cultural, racial, gender, learning, and other differences
are handled, and how valued students feel they and their ideas are to classmates and teachers exposed additional factors. New students’ ability to assimilate into the culture of a new school and to what degree students’ expressed a sense of being in control of their present choices and future direction are additional social construct factors weighing in on perceptions of teacher approachability.

Secondly, the researcher posed questions to the students related to their home environment and to ascertain whether any impact on perceptions of teacher approachability was attributed to family dynamics. Questions about family structure and proximity, household rules and enforcement, and engagement with their parents for advice and support connected to the development of students’ perceptions of others and actions taken based on those perceptions – specifically with teachers. The home environment is the first place a child begins to develop self-awareness and awareness of others, communication skills, and relationship dynamics. The purpose of this specific question evaluated to what extent the home environment influenced students’ perceptions, not so much as to determine that it does.

Finally, the third subquestion explored to what extent the student-teacher relationship impacts perceptions of teacher approachability and subsequent actions based on perceptions. The students described characteristics of teachers they would approach and others they would avoid, affirming the perception of approachability was more connected to the teacher’s personality than their own. In conjunction with a teacher’s approachability, the strength of the student-teacher relationship was an equally strong factor in students’ decisions to approach their teachers about school-related matters. Whether the factors represented social constructs in school, the home environment, or the
teacher-student relationship, the students’ awareness, ability to communicate effectively, and their relationships with their teachers were the key themes in this research study.

Discussion

Designed to hear middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, this grounded theory study was rooted in a framework of four different theories and literature related to this focus of study. In thinking of possible explanations for how middle school students developed their sense of teacher approachability and then determined whether to approach their teachers regarding school-related matters, the researcher identified four specific theories that could offer insight on the stated issue. In conjunction with the theories, other related literature was explored in order to determine what previous studies had discovered on this topic.

Theoretical Framework

Approach-Avoidance Theory. Since the purpose of this study is to determine the factors that play a part in the development of middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, the logical theory to first consider is the approach-avoidance theory. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the assessment of whether to approach or avoid is measured according to three factors: tension, valence, and distance (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Tension reflects the attractiveness or repulsiveness of the goal; valence corresponds to the quality or intensity of the attraction/repulsion; and distance is how easily accessible each goal is (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). In the context of this study, the participants were asked to describe characteristics of an approachable teacher and those of a teacher they would avoid. The students also were asked about the likelihood of approaching each type of teacher if they needed to discuss something related to school.
The participants were unified in their descriptions of the approachable/avoidable teacher as well as agreeing their decisions to approach or avoid a teacher were determined more by the teacher’s personality than their own; however, the students’ proposed actions for seeking help were varied. The students’ self-described tendencies aligned with the approach-avoidance theorists’ descriptions of three tendencies: approach-approach, avoidance-avoidance, and approach-avoidance (Roeckelein, 2006), and reflected in tension, valence, and distance (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). The participants’ responses to asking what would be gained or lost by approaching or avoiding a teacher were mixed and not definitive. In fact, it seemed as though the students were still assessing their approach/avoid tendencies and their perceptions of teachers as they evaluated the risk of approaching or avoiding.

**Social Conflict Theory.** Some of the participants provided illustrations of conflict with their teachers, how they felt about the conflict, how they thought their teachers viewed and treated them as a result of the conflict, how the conflict influenced their perceptions of teacher approachability, and the students’ decision-making processes in talking to those same teachers with whom they had conflict. From the recounting of their stories and experiences, it did not seem as though all of the students had been well coached or prepared by their parents for wading into and handling conflict effectively. Perhaps conversations with and modeling by parents regarding conflict resolution had occurred; however, not all of the students referred to such when asked about approaching a teacher to discuss a school-related matter. Some of the participants expressed confidence in handling matters on their own while others said they would ask their parents for help in knowing what to say in navigating conflict with a teacher.
The participants’ responses regarding how differences are viewed and treated at school were consistently aligned and not one student in any of the school models stated that differences were a significant negative factor in their school cultures. Although differences may be recognized, the consensus was that differences were accepted and did not create barriers or problems. Karl Marx’s social conflict theory proposed differences resulted in conflict; however, the participants’ perspectives would not validate the premise of his theory (Marx & Engels, 1978; Rogers, 2013). More important to the students is the strength of relationships with their classmates as well as their teachers. Differences, from their perspective, were not even factors to be considered.

**Attachment theory.** Although further analysis is recommended for evaluating the significance of the Attachment theory to middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability, and resulting actions, upon reflection of the participants’ responses, the researcher ascertains a close connection between the theory and students’ lived experiences. While determining the exact reasons why the participants may have reacted in particular situations in the manner they described could provide richer data, it is still very appropriate to connect the Attachment theory to the students’ perceptions of and relationships with their teachers.

Research shows that strong attachments in the early years produce a greater sense of security, which then transfers into a greater sense of confidence in approaching other adults, such as teachers as a child becomes an adolescent (Davis, 2003 Dykas et al., 2010; Karam, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). A child’s sense of safety with primary caregivers transfers directly to other significant adults and a child reads an adult’s demeanor as one who is safe or not safe reflective of the primary caregiver’s demeanor. The secondary
caregiver can overcome a child’s apprehensions and resistant tendencies, though, by demonstrating safety and security for the child over time.

Throughout the data collection process, the participants each expressed a desire to feel connected to their teachers and to enjoy a close, healthy relationship with them. Even though some of the students appeared shy or awkward, they still verbalized the same desire for close relationships with their teachers. Specific interview questions targeted the student-parent relationship in order to garner some insight into how attached the students felt towards their parents. Generally speaking, the students described positive relationships with their parents, which in turn, influenced the desire for close relationships with their teachers.

**Social Cognitive Theory.** The Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) completes the theoretical framework for this research study and provides another lens through which to examine the participants’ responses to questions specifically aimed at understanding their perspectives of experiences and events in their lives. Bandura (1989) believed people can control the impact of life events to a certain degree, thus by application, middle school students have a measure of control over the impact of their life events as well. Specific to the purpose of this study, the Social cognitive theory supports the rationale for why some participants stated they would still talk to an unapproachable teacher and felt there was more to be gained than lost by doing so.

Students who understand the meaning of metacognition (to think about what you are thinking about) will recognize their ability to gather their thoughts and secure their emotions in order to approach their teachers about school-related matters. For them, whether or not the teacher is regarded as approachable is a moot point. These students
understand self-advocacy, finding their voice, and speaking up for themselves. They also understand the importance of speaking up for someone who is being bullied, even to the extent of speaking directly to the one bullying. The participants also agree they have a certain amount of control over their present decisions and future direction, even as middle school students. They noted they have control over their grades, which will have a direct impact on where they will be able to attend college and pursue careers in the future. The participants’ responses in the data collection process, through the lens of the Social Cognitive Theory, emphasize yet again the emergence of the three key themes of self-awareness and other-awareness, communication, and relationships.

**Related Literature**

**Origins.** As previously stated, students draw their sense of identity and value from their families of origin. Much of what is modeled for them at home establishes the framework for how they will interact, engage, and develop their perspectives of events and relationships outside the home environment (Danielsen et al., 2009). Several of the interview and journal/blog questions were designed for the participants to describe their home environments, family relationships, and decision-making processes as they reflected upon previous conversations with family members. Recognizing how much influence their families had over student-teacher relationships, the participants were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of parental or sibling help in navigating school issues and relationships. The students described their own close family relationships or the desire to have closer, more connected ones. The participants were also asked to describe any cultural differences they observed between their friends’ parents’ style of parenting in comparison to their own parents’ style. Even though only a few students’ parents were
born and reared outside the southeastern United States, the parents or guardians shared the same expectations of their children’s behavior, academic performance, and decision-making abilities.

**Adolescent needs and differences.** Much of the empirical research highlighted in this study is affirmed through the participants’ responses regarding adolescent needs and differences; however, a few distinctions of the typical adolescent were not represented in the sample of students in this particular study. For example, although it is commonly believed that adolescents gravitate towards sameness and resist differences, this study’s participants stated differences were not negatively viewed in their schools and they would encourage a new student to just “be yourself” in trying to fit in. Also, it was anticipated that boys and girls would differ in their perspectives and experiences regarding conflict and resulting actions (Ahern, 2006). The male and female participants in this study did not reflect gender differences in conflict experiences or resolution either in their home environments or school contexts. There was not any distinguishable difference in gender as to those students who would approach and those who would avoid talking to their teachers regarding school-related matters. Previous research suggests that girls are more relationally driven than boys (Danielsen et al., 2009); however, the participants in this research study did not reflect these previous research findings. According to the participants’ responses, everyone expressed a desire to connect relationally with their teachers and classmates. Not only did they emphasize their desire to connect, but they also expressed the frustration and disappointment when it did not happen.
Interestingly, regarding gender differences, the participants at The Alpha Academy and Swensen Middle School expressed the same perspective that male teachers seem to be nicer and more patient than female teachers, although they admittedly had few male teachers in their educational experiences up to that point in time. Only Stella mentioned gender discrepancies in how male and female students were treated at her school and expectations of capabilities.

The topic of resiliency was explored with the participants (after explaining and illustrating its meaning,) and they were asked to evaluate how resilient they considered themselves to be. Their responses did not come as readily as with other questions, but most considered themselves to be resilient as they provided examples to illustrate their reflection. A healthy sense of resiliency during the adolescent years is vital in all realms and is directly connected to students’ academic success (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noan, 2013; Malti & Noam, 2008).

Most certainly, the participants expressed their desire for greater independence and autonomy (Hamman & Hendricks, 2005) as they move through their adolescent years. The students reiterated wanting to handle situations on their own and not depend on their parents to handle them on their behalf numerous times. Without using the term “self-advocacy,” the participants stated they would speak up for themselves and others if needed and did not expect their parents to get involved.

**Middle school model versus junior high model.** Interestingly, Metro Christian School’s sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grades are the Junior High division at their school, not Middle School as other private, public, and Christian schools are named in the metro area. The reasoning for maintaining that label was not explored by the researcher. The
middle school model was first introduced in order to pay closer attention to the developmental needs of the early adolescent and to create academic and emotional/social programming that specifically addressed their needs. The common belief in the 1960s was students would experience greater academic success, in preparation for their high school years, if the educational environments were more targeted towards their developmental needs (Sands, 2011). The Junior High model was viewed as a younger rendition of high school and the younger adolescent’s developmental needs were ignored (Board, n.d.). Although the reasoning for the development of the middle school model has not altered and the value continues to be revered, economic and litigation trends have changed the implementation of a worthy endeavor. The original ideas for the middle school model have all but failed in today’s schools.

**Professional development for middle school teachers.** In conjunction with the distinctions between the middle school and junior high models, the required distinctions in professional development geared specifically for middle school teachers are paramount. Middle school students have unique developmental needs and those who teach them benefit from resources and support that equip them to meet the students’ needs (Karam, 2006; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Sands, 2011). When the participants were asked about ideas for professional development for their teachers, they made some noteworthy and practical suggestions. Several students mentioned role-playing scenarios where the teachers took turns playing the role of students and teachers to help develop greater awareness of approachability. Without the participants having read this research study or knowing what had been written about early adolescents’ needs, they conveyed a simple understanding of how their teachers could be equipped to meet the students’ needs.
through effective professional development (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Oftentimes, professional development is geared towards logistical challenges, pedagogy, technology, and trends in education, without considering the ultimate recipients – the students. This study’s participants reiterated the need for pertinent professional development for middle school teachers, specifically geared towards teacher approachability.

**Teacher-Student Relationships.** At the core of this research study is the teacher-student relationship and, specifically, middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability based upon their shared relationship. Students long to be known and pursued by their teachers and enjoy a sense of connectedness with them (Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Matsumura et al., 2008; Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Wentzel, 1997). The participants suggested it would be good for their teachers to share stories of when they were in middle school so the students would recognize their teachers understand common struggles. If students know their teachers can relate to them, the participants stated a special connection or bond forms that results in greater confidence for the student and increased perceptions of teacher approachability (LaRusso & Selman, 2011).

Reiterating previous research, the participants affirmed that the safer a teacher seemed to them, the more approachable the teacher seemed as well (Danielsen et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Karam, 2006; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Lyles, 2014; Saha, 2012). The safe factor is more about emotional safety, yet the resulting benefit reflected in teacher approachability had a positive impact on the students’ academics (Matsumura et al., 2008). Additionally, the participants shared they feel shut down when a teacher ignores or scoffs at their questions and does not answer them. The natural consequence would be potentially lower academic performance (Matsumura et al., 2008).
different ways and through many different responses, the participants expressed how much they desired a good relationship with their teachers.

**Self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy.** As seen in Chapter Four self-awareness is one of the three emerging themes of the research study and is also a key dynamic in students’ development of self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy. One distinction of middle school students is their quest for independence while also being dependent upon their parents and others. The participants expressed their preference to approach teachers on their own behalf (if they felt the teacher was approachable) as opposed to their parents stepping in and taking charge. This serves as a great example of all the “selfs” (self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy) that are required for young adolescents to develop. Their self-efficacy reflects confidence and self-assuredness. However, often times, young adolescents do not have the emotional/social maturity and foresight to navigate potential confrontations well (Miller 2011).

The natural course of child and adolescent development moves a child from concrete to abstract thinking and from total dependence upon others to a growing desire to be independent and on one’s own (Vernon, 2009). The participants demonstrated these transitions through their stated responses, both through what they said and what they implied. The set of questions that addressed this particular section provided one-on-one insight into adolescent thinking and reiterated the validity of previous research findings. Finally, the students’ responses around their personal experiences with bullying and their practices of addressing bullying issues shed more light on how they perceived themselves, their tendencies to speak up on behalf of others, and their sense of self-...
efficacy. In short, the participants’ responses verified previous research about adolescent “selves.”

**Implications**

**Theoretical Implications**

**Approach-avoidance theory.** According to the theory, and in line with the participants’ responses, the implications of this theory are multi-faceted. First of all, the perceived approachability factor of the teacher is assessed by the student and weighs heavily in the decision-making process of whether a student will approach the teacher regarding school-related matters. Additionally, the student must determine how important it is to talk to the teacher, previous experiences of approaching the teacher – their own experiences and others’, calculating the risk of approaching or avoiding in a potential gain/loss estimation, and the student’s relationship with the teacher (whether the student feels close to the teacher). Although the student does not think in terms of tension, valence, and distance in deciding whether to approach or avoid the teacher, all of these factors weigh in on the student’s decision.

As suggested by several of the participants, they recommended that an anonymous survey be issued in order to determine whether a teacher’s self-perception of approachability aligned with the students’ perceptions and lived experiences. The participants also stressed the importance of teachers receiving the students’ input without disagreeing or refuting what is stated. From this educator’s experience with students in the classroom, a regular student survey of students, with specific questions about teacher approachability and tendencies of students, should be required at least once a year. The
teachers and their supervisors would collate the responses and this exercise would be included in the teacher’s yearly review.

**Social conflict theory.** The researcher did not anticipate usage of the term “conflict resolution” by the participants and only briefly suggested it during the data collection process. Talking around the term during the interviews was for the purpose of understanding the participants’ perspectives and experiences with their parents and teachers without suggesting they were in conflict with either when addressing issues. Because conflict and conflict resolution can embody negative connotations and the researcher’s goal was to take a more positive tact regarding teacher approachability, the terms were inferred rather than stated. With that said, the participants’ recounting of navigating issues with their parents and teachers seemed more reflective of what they had learned on their own rather than been intentionally taught. Their strategies represented trial and error and learning what worked and did not work. This dynamic presents a golden opportunity for parents and educators to teach students how to define conflict and develop effective conflict resolution strategies as a life skill. Students could learn to evaluate effective styles of conflict resolution and recognize the inherent value of learning to resolve conflict well.

On a side note, the social conflict theory purports that differences are the source of conflict, so if differences were removed or leveled, conflict would cease to exist. The participants in this study acknowledged the existence of a variety of differences in their schools, but did not identify them as a negative factor in their school cultures. At this time in the United States of America, the participants’ perspectives are refreshing. Whatever they learned at home or at school needs to be championed across the country.
How differences are viewed and treated is the source of conflict, not the differences themselves.

**Attachment theory.** The underlying premise of the attachment theory is the degree to which a child experiences attachment to the primary caregiver is reflected in how attached the child becomes to secondary caregivers in the future. Although the scope of the research study did not include assessing the participants’ degree of attachment to their parents or guardians, the students did seem to convey a positive picture of attachment at home. Perhaps this sense of attachment was evidenced in their desire to feel close to their teachers and enjoy a positive relationship with them.

A worthy exercise for educators would be to develop an instrument to assess a student’s attachment to the primary caregiver along with the capacity for a secondary caregiver. This would provide the educator with a potential understanding of where to begin with a child’s capability to attach to others. Also, if a student seems to be removed or distant, an educator could explore the possibility that a lack of attachment to the primary caregiver may be the explanation. In most circumstances, a secondary caregiver is able to establish attachment over time, even if attachment to the primary caregiver was not strong or healthy. Educators should keep this in mind as they work to establish positive relationships with their students.

**Social cognitive theory.** Of all the theories in this study’s theoretical framework, the social cognitive theory is the most empowering for the student because it highlights the control that a person can exercise over their choices and responses to events. A student can understand factors that can be controlled as well as the ability to control responses to events, which cannot be controlled. A developing adolescent, who is
striving to become more and more independent, would fare well if parents and educators would explain the tenets of this theory. Many of the study’s participants demonstrated practical application of this theory even though they did not articulate awareness of its existence or its ramifications.

The social cognitive theory presents a variety of opportunities for parents and educators to teach adolescents about metacognition, awareness, taking every thought captive (2 Cor. 10:3-5), thinking in a productive and healthy manner (Phil. 4:8), and being other-oriented in their perspective. Words, actions, decisions, and countenance begin with what is in the mind – one’s thoughts, perspective, and worldview. To help shape an adolescent’s thoughts and perspectives is challenging and rewarding at the same time because everyone lives life out of their thoughts and thoughts can be controlled even when events and situations cannot.

**Empirical Implications**

**Origins.** Both a positive and negative aspect exists when connecting a student’s perspective of teacher approachability to the family of origin. A student, whose home life is healthy, supportive, equipping, safe, and stable fares well in being prepared for success at school. On the other hand, a student whose home life is characterized as unhealthy, unsupportive, filled with tension, lacking in being equipped, unsafe, and unstable will struggle in facing challenges and experiencing satisfaction and success at school. The home environment sets a student up for future success or hinders if basic needs are not met. Home is where students first learn awareness of self and others, effective and non-effective communication skills, and how to live in relationship with others.
A student is the recipient of strong home-school partnerships where the significant adults in the student’s life are working together on the student’s behalf. Students benefit when parents and educators communicate clearly and positively with each other and teach and model the same expectations for the students’ behavior and sense of responsibility. Although a teacher may not be able to influence the home environment to a great degree, the teacher can influence the classroom environment by establishing clear expectations and pursuing healthy relationships with all students.

**Adolescent Needs and Differences.** At the core of adolescent needs and differences is the desire to connect with other significant adults, specifically their teachers at school. Basic adolescent needs have been noted and adjustments have been made that recognize some adolescent needs have begun to emerge earlier in life. Meeting the current adolescent’s needs has required that educators make some adjustments in how those needs are met. The discrepancy between intellectual maturity and emotional/social maturity is significant such that parents and educators alike must be intentional in filling in the gaps created by the technology and social media boom.

As mentioned previously, even though middle school students are generally perceived to gravitate towards sameness, the participants in the three school models did not portray such a perspective. Once again, they stated that differences are not viewed negatively and new students are encouraged to “just be yourself” in order to fit in. Those responses seem to be an anomaly to what is usually understood about middle school students, but perhaps intentionality in the home and at school accounts for helping students learn to accept differences positively and to be mindful of other people’s needs.
**Middle school model versus junior high model.** Researching the studies about the rationale for developing the middle school model in lieu of the junior high model serves as a great reminder of best practices intended for supporting the young adolescent. What should have been a well-developed answer for addressing adolescent needs and differences in their specially designed environments has become obsolete in middle schools currently. Small group environments, mentoring teachers, professional development, programming, and scheduling, specific to the original middle school model have changed to accommodate budgetary constraints and the fear of litigation. Middle school administrators and teachers should research the original design and plans for the middle school model and consider resurrecting as much as they possibly can as they think outside the proverbial box of possibilities.

**Professional development for middle school teachers.** Ongoing, effective, and relevant professional development designed specifically for middle school teachers would provide the support, resources, and understanding needed for creating engaging and nurturing environments for middle school students. Educators would be reminded of the basic needs of all students and receive help for discerning middle school students’ specific needs and desires. According to the student participants, teachers should role play in their professional development sessions to remind themselves of what it was like to be an adolescent and to attempt putting themselves into their students’ shoes in order to see themselves through their students’ eyes. Those responsible for planning professional development for teachers should be mindful of equipping middle school teachers for meeting the distinctive needs of middle school students. Even though there may be overlap of information that pertains to either elementary or high school teachers,
professional development that is specifically intended for middle school teachers promises to reap great benefits for the teachers and students alike. Including assessments of self-awareness (such as EQ or EI instruments) would be worthwhile.

**Teacher-student relationships.** A resounding message throughout the data collection process was the participants’ stated desire to feel close and connected to their teachers. The one outlier was one of Stella’s male teachers from a previous year who made her feel uncomfortable and “weird.” The students wanted their teachers to be approachable so they could feel comfortable talking to their teachers about school-related matters and personal ones as well. Several students also expressed their desire that teachers pursue them to offer help privately as opposed to an open class forum where the students might feel too awkward or embarrassed to ask for help. At no time did the participants infer that respect for their teachers would be compromised with the pursuit of a closer relationship. Teachers telling personal stories about themselves and their families was one suggestion made by the participants for how students could enjoy a sense of feeling closer to their teachers. Proximity and availability were other ideas offered where teachers would move around their classrooms more and into the spaces of the students as opposed to staying in the front of the classroom or sitting at their desks. Not only are these ideas reflective of relationship-building strategies, but also good master teaching skills.

**Self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy.** Self-awareness is one of the key themes, which emerged from this research study, and is integral in middle school students’ understanding of themselves as it relates to self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-advocacy. Middle school students may be accused of being self-absorbed, but
the participants’ responses revealed a greater sense of self- and other-awareness than being consumed with their own interests and desires. Teachers who understand their students’ wish to connect with them relationally will leverage this yearning on the students’ behalf by helping them develop a greater and more grounded sense of self-efficacy and self-determination through appropriate self-advocacy skills. As mentioned previously, most self-advocacy training is provided to students of exceptionality – those who are gifted and those who have learning challenges – so they can speak up for themselves. Parents and educators would bestow an amazing gift on students by teaching them how to self-advocate effectively.

Good self-advocacy skills, combined with self- and other-awareness, and the ability to grasp the value of regularly practicing metacognition will put a student in good stead for exercising a healthy approach to self-efficacy and self-determination. Parents and educators should intentionally instruct and guide middle school students in developing all of the healthy “selves” not only to successfully navigate their adolescent years, but also to prepare them well for their future. The significant adults in an adolescent’s life carries the most influence in supporting students through a potentially difficult season of their lives. Helping students to understand themselves better and equipping them to thrive during their adolescent years is a worthy endeavor that reaps great reward for the recipients.
Practical Implications

In order to avoid redundancy and repetition, this section of practical implications highlights the three major themes, other assumptions, and considerations that are stated or implied by the research study.

Assess. When asked how teachers could assess their own perceptions of how approachable they thought they were in light of the students’ lived experiences with them, the participants suggested the teachers offer an anonymous survey and not be defensive about the students’ input or comments. If a teacher sincerely wants to know students’ perceptions of approachability, they should be provided with a platform for honest feedback and not be penalized for giving it. An educator who has a teachable spirit will welcome student input and feedback no matter how many years served in education. A wise educator is always growing and developing the craft of teaching while connecting with students.

Attend. If the educational process and environments are ultimately designed for the students’ benefit, not the teachers’, it makes sense that educators attend to assessing every component that will help students be successful in every aspect of their educational journey. Sometimes educational systems lose sight of what is best for the end user (the student) and develop programs and environments that accommodate the facilitator (teacher). Administrators and educators need to attend to the real needs of students by asking the students themselves and assessing their responses. The students might provide greater insight than imagined.

Awareness. Even though EQ and EI are not new terms, they have become more relevant in business and educational settings in an attempt to develop a greater sense of
self-awareness and understanding of how people experience one another. An adolescent is transitioning from being self-absorbed as a baby and small child to learning how to be aware of self in relation to others. Teaching an adolescent to become other-oriented is a worthy enterprise, but it begins with developing a sense of self-awareness. Parents and educators can help students gain an objective view of themselves and how others experience them. Students can learn how they represent their selves to others and determine whether that is agreeable to them. Additionally, students can learn to demonstrate empathy and care for others as they become aware of others’ needs and struggles. The challenge in helping students develop a sense of self is ensuring self-awareness does not lead back to self-absorption. Therefore, emphasis on becoming other-oriented is critical in maintaining an appropriate balance.

**Communication.** The second theme to emerge from the data is communication and its many facets. The participants were eager to communicate their perceptions of teacher approachability in addition to answering the other questions they were asked for the research study. They also wanted to enjoy good communication with their families, their friends, and their teachers and were open to suggestions for improving their communication skills. Even with the differences in personalities with some being introverts and others extraverts, the students still wanted to communicate their thoughts.

**Relationships.** The third theme reflected well the focus of the study as students described their perceptions of teacher approachability and how those perceptions influenced the students’ interactions with their teachers. More than anything else, the students frequently expressed their desire to have close relationships with their teachers. They wanted their teachers to be safe for them to approach about school-related and
personal matters. Because of the researcher’s biblical worldview, this theme is not surprising as it reflects the design placed within every person, which is the desire to be connected relationally with others. The fact that the participants expressed their desire to be close to their teachers simply reflects the intention of their design.

**Safety.** In the context of this study, emotional/social safety is the framework for students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. If teachers are considered to be safe in the students’ minds, they are also considered to be approachable. If teachers were not viewed as safe, then students would typically avoid talking to them about school-related matters. For the participants who expressed an understanding of emotional/social safety, their description included feeling comfortable, accepted, easy to talk to, and welcoming. Educators, who want to understand how safe they are perceived by others, could find an existing or develop their own instrument for assessing their safety factor. Additionally, it would be good to ask different groups of people, including family and friends, to determine if the safety factor changes according to the type of relationship.

**Words.** In addition to the major theme of communication that emerged from the body of research, a separate focus on the power of words is significant in consideration of practical implications. Communication is more about the process and words focus on the content of what was communicated. Educators who have the ability to measure the impact of their words and to read the reactions of recipients possess the greatest potential for communicating effectively with their students. Understanding that words can build up or tear down, encourage or discourage, and offer hope or dash dreams is the educator’s key in connecting well with students. Typically, students simply want to know their teachers like and value them. Educators’ words hold great power in students’
perceptions of themselves; therefore, educators should know if their words are helping to strengthen or hinder their relationships with students.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

**Delimitations**

The suggested sample size for a grounded theory study ranges from 10-15 participants. This research study had 14 participants from three different school models. The reasoning behind three different models was to explore any significant differences in perspectives or experiences between middle school students from a public, private, and Christian school in a metro area in the southeastern part of the United States. The study was also limited to general education students so as to avoid complexity in the research findings, thus potentially skewing emerging themes and commonalities.

Middle school students were specifically targeted for the focus of this research study as opposed to elementary students (who generally have a trusting and nurturing relationship with their teachers) or high school students (who often have already navigated the approach/avoidance perception of teachers and may respond differently to approaching teachers than middle school students since all grades “count” in high school). Originally, the study was only going to research seventh-grade students’ perceptions, but the sample was expanded to include sixth- and eighth-grade students in order to collect even richer data on the lower and upper spectrum of middle school students’ experiences. As professional development is not often designed specifically for middle school teachers’ relationships with their students, this was another purpose for this research study.
The data collection process was designed with the middle school student’s attention span in mind. The individual interviews each lasted 20-30 minutes and the focus group interviews ranged from 26-31 minutes. In order to achieve this timeframe, the number of questions was reduced and some questions were rewritten for greater clarity and brevity.

Diversity within the sample size was desired, so the demographic questionnaire was designed to help provide a diverse pool of participants. Incredible diversity within the sampling and the goal was achieved organically through the students and parents who returned the assent/consent forms. The purpose of selecting three different school models was to determine if any significant or apparent distinctions were reflected in the students’ responses depending upon the schools they attended, or if middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability were consistent no matter which school model they represented. Additionally, the three school models were in three different north metro counties and represented different community demographics. Selecting other schools in the metro area may have provided additional data, but it is not anticipated anything of significance would have been revealed.

Limitations

One limitation in this research study was the difficulty in locating and receiving permission from schools for becoming data collection sites, which represented the three different school models in three different metro counties. The data collection process could not move forward until permission from each school’s administrator was secured. The timeframe for obtaining final permission from the administrators lasted five months.
Due to the timing (near the end of the school year) and the limits of the IRB and Cox County Accountability and Research Office’s established timeframe for beginning and ending the data collection process, it became imperative to move the study forward with the students who responded to the invitation to become participants and the researcher was satisfied that rich data could be collected from the students who consented to be involved in the study. Students could not be forced to participate in the research study nor could parents be forced to allow their children to participate either. The number of participants satisfied the sample number recommended for a grounded theory study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Another limitation was the necessity of accommodating the schools’ and students’ schedules each time any phase of data collection was needed. Subsequently, the students sometimes felt rushed for their interviews and had to eat their lunches while answering questions. Some of the participants were involved in other school activities at the time of data collection so a couple had to leave the interview sessions quickly or early. Each phase of the data collection process did not always go in the same sequence as anticipated. The end of the school year rushed the journaling/blogging phase more than desired. Also, the locations for meeting with the students were a limitation because of noise and distractions, even though each school administrator tried to be as accommodating as possible.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The student-teacher relationship is at the forefront of the findings for this research study. Students desire to have healthy relationships with their teachers and to feel as though they can talk to them if they need to. The word “connected” was used many times
to describe how the students wanted to relate to their teachers. A future study might explore students’ sense of connectedness to their teachers, hearing the students’ voices describing what it means to be connected, why it is important to them, how to foster connectedness, and what hinders connectedness. A grounded theory or phenomenological study would be appropriate for this topic.

Another research study might focus on the methods a school employs to create an environment of approachability for students and their teachers. This study would be appropriate for elementary, middle, and high school divisions and could consider the students’ and teachers’ perspectives and experiences. Self-assessments could be compared to others’ assessments of approachability. Instruments that measure self-awareness or EQ could be implemented in the research process. This study may even compare/contrast a school that is pursuing the development of an environment of approachability and a school that has already been through a self-study and implementation process. A qualitative study is the most appropriate approach and grounded theory a possible design.

A third recommended study for future research would focus on children who have been raised by their parents to develop and exercise self-advocacy skills with adults and other children. A longevity approach to this topic would provide rich data, especially as students were followed from early elementary years through high school and into college or their careers. A case study, qualitative approach following two children, a male and a female, could produce insight into developing self-advocacy skills in children.

Two other recommended studies could explore approach-avoidance tendencies in children. One study would correlate children’s personality types and their approach-
avoidance tendencies using a mixed methods approach. Participants from any age group would qualify for this study with an approximate sample size of one hundred. Diversity in demographics would add richness to the study. A second study, using a case study approach of longevity could follow the impact of approach-avoidance tendencies of a student beginning in elementary school and following the student through high school to understand the impact and outcome of following through on approaching or avoiding teachers.

**Summary**

When this journey first began, wise counselors gave warning that the research topic needed to be intriguing for the researcher and hold a measure of mystery to be solved. Developing a research study and writing a dissertation to document the process has certainly been one of the most arduous tasks in an educational pursuit. Due to unforeseen circumstances, this research topic was chosen within a twenty-four hour period of time during a course intensive. A love for middle school students, probing into conflict resolution strategies, hearing people’s stories, and understanding what is in the hearts and minds of students all helped to guide the direction of this project. Thankfully, the study has indeed been intriguing and the mystery was not too difficult to solve.

As promised, the participants’ voices have been heard and their message is simple. Middle school students long (not overstated) to have healthy relationships with their teachers and view them more like family or friends so they can receive help as needed and can feel a sense of connection to adults with whom they spend so many of their waking hours. The students did not propose having close relationships with their teachers at the expense of respect, or obedience, or compliance. They simply wanted to
know their teachers would help them with academic or emotional/social matters if needed. The students stated that enjoying close relationships with their teachers would help pave the way for future conversations. The unstated question rumbling around in their minds was whether the teachers wanted healthy, close relationships with their students. Not only did the students describe perceptions of teacher approachability, but they also queried whether the teachers were available for them – academically and otherwise.

The theoretical framework and the related literature for this study helped guide every step of the research plan. Even though a researcher cannot predetermine the findings of a study, having a road map is imperative in addition to wise counsel from experienced researchers. The greatest blessing received during the entire research study was interviewing the participants then analyzing their responses over and over again. Not only could their voices be heard and their mannerisms observed on the recordings, but also remembering time spent with each of them became a treasure not to be quickly forgotten. As much as time would allow, every opportunity to encourage and affirm the participants was taken in the data collection process. Adolescents are at a pivotal time of their lives and typically wrestle with identity and self-perception. As an outsider, the researcher saw this unique slice of time as a golden opportunity to affirm their strengths and validate their value. The participants were not simply subjects of a research study, they are fearfully and wonderfully designed for a greater purpose than they can imagine. Perhaps their participation will help to instill greater confidence in approaching their teachers to discuss school-related and personal matters.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A: Introductory Email to School Administrators

Dear Administrator,

My name is Kathy Teston and I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. I am also the Head of School at [Name of School] in Roswell, GA. Currently, I am conducting a qualitative research study of middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and how their perceptions influence interactions with their teachers. I am requesting the opportunity to present my research plan to you in person with the hope that you will grant permission for me to include four of your middle school students in my data collection and analysis. Just for peace of mind, your school and the students would have pseudonyms in my dissertation to protect the identity of everyone.

I would like to set up a thirty-minute appointment for me to meet with you in the next couple weeks in order to better explain my research plan and to answer any of your questions or concerns. Like you, I am passionate about students learning to self-advocate and find their voices to speak up when they should. You and your students have the potential of offering understanding of middle school students’ perspectives of teacher approachability and providing insights for students, educators, and parents.

Thank you for taking the time to read this email. I know you probably keep a steady pace of dealing with school-related matters every day. If I could meet with you briefly to see if my proposal would be agreeable to you, I would be very grateful. I will call your office in the next couple days.

Kindly yours,

Kathryn Teston
Appendix B: Step-by-Step Timeline

Kathryn Teston’s Research Study
Theme: Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability

Step One:
One sentence questionnaire: have you ever had a teacher that seemed to be unapproachable? _______ yes _______ no
(This question would be given to all 6th-8th middle school students at your school. It can be administered through a hard copy or an electronic method such as Survey Monkey or Google Doc. The students would need to provide their names in order to continue with the next step).

Step Two:
I would send out a letter to parents of students who marked “yes” on the questionnaire explaining the purpose of the research study, who I am, and what would be required to participate. I will provide the letters and consent forms (Parent/Guardian Consent Form and Child Consent Form).

Step Three:
The Demographic Questionnaire would be distributed to all 6th-8th grade students who have returned the two signed consent forms.

Step Four:
I will select four participants for the research study, representing as diverse a sampling as possible. The Principal is welcome to weigh in on the selection. The students will choose their own pseudonyms.

Step Five:
The four participants will participate in an individual interview, each lasting 30 minutes.

Step Six:
The four participants will participate in a focus group interview together, lasting about 45 minutes.

Step Seven:
I will transcribe the interviews and ask each student for a quick read for verification or clarification.

Step Eight:
The students will choose whether or not they want to write in a hard copy journal or to write on a blog, answering questions over an eight school-day period of time. This would take about 15 minutes of their time each evening.

Step Nine:
I collect all journal/blog entries and present each participant with a $25 iTunes card to thank them for participating.
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 1, 2016

Kathryn M Teston
IRB Approval 2396.030116: A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions

Dear Kathryn,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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Appendix D: IRB Approval Email

Thursday, March 3, 2016 at 4:53:01 PM Eastern Standard Time

Subject: IRB Approval 2396.030116: A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students' Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions

Date: Tuesday, March 1, 2016 at 4:23:05 PM Eastern Standard Time

From: IRB, IRB

To: Teston, Kathryn Marquette

CC: Zabloski, James L (School of Divinity Instruction), IRB, IRB

Dear Kathryn,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form 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 should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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Appendix E: IRB Approval to Change School Setting

Subject: IRB Change in Protocol Approval: IRB Approval 2396.030116: A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students' Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions

Date: Tuesday, March 29, 2016 at 11:40:15 AM Eastern Daylight Time

From: IRB, IRB

To: Teston, Kathryn Marquette

CC: Zabloski, James L. (School of Divinity Instruction), IRB, IRB

Good Morning Kathryn,

This email is to inform you that your request to include [redacted information] in your study and to remove [redacted information] from your study has been approved.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Best,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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Appendix F: IRB Parent Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/1/16 to 2/28/17
Protocol # 2396.030116

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM
A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions
Kathryn Marquette Teston
Liberty University
School of Education

Your child/student is invited to be in a research study of middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability. He or she was selected as a possible participant because he or she indicated present or past experiences of teachers not being perceived as approachable. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow him or her to be considered for the study.

Kathryn Marquette Teston, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to investigate how middle school student perceptions of teacher approachability influence their interactions with teachers.

Procedures:

If you agree to allow your child/student to be in this study, I would ask him or her to do the following things:

1. Complete a confidential demographic questionnaire for the purpose of helping to select a diverse group of students for the study. The students will provide their names on the questionnaires so the researcher is able to contact those who are selected. Four students from each school will be asked to continue with the research study. The questionnaire will be given on one day at the principal’s determination of time. The questionnaire will be administered electronically and will take less than fifteen minutes to complete. The researcher will select the four participants from each school the same week the questionnaires are given.

2. If selected for the study, your child/student will participate in confidential individual (audio recorded) and confidential focus group (video recorded) interviews in order to answer questions regarding his or her perceptions of teacher approachability. The questions will also address the decisions made that determine whether or not the student will interact with his or her teachers regarding school-related matters. With the principal’s approval of the date/times, the individual interviews will all take place the same week, on the school campus, and each interview will last about thirty minutes. The focus group interviews will take place on the school campus as well and will last approximately one hour. The focus group interview schedule will also be coordinated with the principal and will take place after the individual interviews are completed. The student’s identity will not be disclosed anywhere in the research study and each student will choose his or her own pseudonym.

3. Following the interviews, the students will answer additional questions about teacher approachability and student interactions either through a hard copy journal, which the researcher will provide, or an electronic blog (the student’s choice). The students’ responses will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office if a hard copy journal is chosen or password secured if writing blog responses in an electronic format is
chosen. The researcher will be the only one with access to the stored or secured data. The students will be given a different question each day, for a total of eight questions over eight days. The students will be asked to provide their confidential responses during a time when they are alone and not distracted, preferably at home. The researcher will collect the journal responses at the end of the eight days and the electronic blog responses at the end of each day. The students should not need to spend more than fifteen minutes each day recording their response to the questions.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The risks involved in this study are no more than the participant would encounter in the everyday life of middle school.

Individuals involved in this study should not expect to receive any direct benefits. A better understanding into middle school students’ perceptions of teachers’ approachability, the factors that comprise their perceptions, and then decisions made in response, promise to be a result of this research study.

Compensation:

Your child/student will receive a $25 iTunes gift card for taking part in and completing this study as one of the school’s four participants. No compensation will be given for completing the demographic questionnaire only.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participants will choose their own pseudonyms (not real names) and the researcher will give a pseudonym to each school. Individual interviews will be audio recorded and the researcher will be the only one with access to the recordings. The audio recordings will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office. The recordings will be erased three years after the researcher has defended the completed research study and her dissertation.

The focus groups will be video recorded to ensure that the researcher accurately identifies who is speaking as she transcribes the recordings for the study. The researcher will also secure the video recordings in a locked cabinet in her office and she will be the only one with access to the recordings. The researcher will erase the video recordings three years after the researcher has defended the completed research study and her dissertation.

The hard copy journals will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s office and she will be the only one with access. The electronic blogs will be password protected and only the researcher and participant will have access to their responses. The researcher will shred the journals and delete the electronic blogs three years after the she has defended the completed research study and her dissertation.

The signed parent and child/student Consent Forms will be stored in a separate locked cabinet and not stored with the data collected from the participants. The researcher will also shred the
signed parent and child/student Consent Forms three years after she defends the completed research study and her dissertation.

No portions of the recordings, journal entries, or blog entries will be used for educational purposes. Although the researcher will protect the participants' identities and confidentiality, she cannot totally assure the participants that confidentiality and privacy will be maintained with the other focus group participants. Although the researcher will emphasize the importance of guarding one another's confidentiality and privacy, she cannot confirm that the other participants will abide by her appeal to them.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child/student to participate will not affect his or her current or future relations with Liberty University, High Meadows School, Greater Atlanta Christian School, Danieli Middle School, or Smitha Middle School. If you decide to allow your child/student to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If your child/student chooses to withdraw from the study, you or he/she should contact the researcher at the email address or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should your child/student choose to withdraw, data collected from him or her, 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 his or her contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if he or she chooses to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Kathryn Teston. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at kathy.teston@fspsaladins.org or 770-993-1650. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Jim Zabloski, at jzabloski@liberty.edu.

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, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child/student to participate in the study.

(Note: Do not agree to allow your child/student to participate unless IRB approval information with current dates has been added to this document.)
☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record my child/student as part of his or her participation in this study.

Signature of Parent or Guardian: ___________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Investigator: ___________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix G: IRB Child Assent Form

Assent of Child to Participate in a Research Study

What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?
The name of the study is Middle School Students' Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions. The Principal Investigator is Mrs. Kathryn Teston.

Why are we doing this study?
We are interested in studying how middle school students feel about their teachers and whether or not their teachers are people they can talk to about school issues.

Why are we asking you to be in this study?
You are being asked to be in this research study because you marked on the questionnaire that you've had teachers you didn't feel comfortable talking to about school issues.

If you agree, what will happen?
If you are chosen for this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the Principal Investigator where your answers will be audio recorded (lasting about 30 minutes on campus), participate in a group interview with the other participants at your school and the Principal Investigator where you will be video-recorded (lasting 45-60 minutes on campus), and answer questions from the Principal Investigator either in a journal or on a blog (your choice). After you have finished the entire research study, you will receive a $25 iTunes gift card from the Principal Investigator.

Do you have to be in this study?
No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

Do you have any questions?
You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

Signature of Child __________________________ Date __________________________

Kathryn M Teston knteston@liberty.edu or 770-993-1650
Dr. James I. Zabloski jizabloski@liberty.edu or 434-907-8820
Liberty University Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record my child/student as part of his or her participation in this study.

Signature of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator: ________________________________ Date: ____________

Parent signature required on this side.
Student signature required on other side.
Appendix H: Office of Accountability and Research Permission

April 14, 2016

Ms. Kathryn Teston
10965 Woodstock Road
Roswell, GA 30075

Dear Ms. Teston:

Your research project titled, A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions, has been approved. Listed below are the schools where approval to conduct the research is complete. Please work with the school administrator to schedule administration of instruments or conduct interviews.

School

Should modifications or changes in research procedures become necessary during the research project, changes must be submitted in writing to the Office of Accountability & Research prior to implementation. At the conclusion of your research project, you are expected to submit a copy of your results to this office. Results cannot reference the [Redacted] School District or any District schools or departments.

Research files are not considered complete until results are received. If you have any questions regarding the process, contact our office at [Redacted].

Sincerely,

[Redacted]

[Redacted] MPA
Manager, Research & Grants Administration
Office of Accountability & Research
Appendix I: Parent Consent Form – Public School

Parental Consent Form

My signature below indicates that I have read the information provided and have decided to allow my child to participate in the study titled “A Grounded Theory Study on Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions” to be conducted at my child’s school between the dates of April 22, 2016 and May 20, 2016.

I understand the purpose of the research project will be to understand middle school students’ perceptions of teacher approachability and the influence those perceptions have on student-teacher interactions. I also understand that my child will participate in the following manner:

1. Individual interviews that will be audio-recorded
2. Focus group interviews with three other students from my child’s school who are also participating in this research study. The focus group interviews will be video-recorded.
3. Journaling or blogging (student’s preference)

Potential benefits of the study:
The students may receive the benefits of analyzing their perspectives of people and situations as well as gain the confidence needed to become their own advocates. The participants may enjoy the benefits of understanding their perspectives of teacher approachability better as well as how their perspectives influence whether or not they will interact with their teachers about school-related matters. Additionally, the study may provide insight into the quality or satisfaction of those interactions. Students may benefit from a greater sense of self-awareness and confidence. Understanding their own perspectives may provide insight into their classmates’ perspectives about teacher approachability as the students consider pursuing help from their teachers. Additionally, it is hoped that the study’s findings will help teachers analyze their own approachability as perceived by their students. Perhaps this study will also guide parents in helping their students learn to self-advocate about school-related issues.

I agree to the following conditions with the understanding that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time should I choose to discontinue participation.

- The identity of participants will be protected. The participants will be known to the participants’ administrator and the Principal Investigator, but the participants will choose their own pseudonyms for data collection and analysis. Their identity will be protected and kept confidential through the study and subsequent to completion of the dissertation. So, data will not be collected anonymously.
- Information gathered during the course of the project will become part of the data analysis and may contribute to published research reports and presentations.
- There are no foreseeable inconveniences or risks involved to my child participating in the study.
- Participation in the study is voluntary and will not affect either student grades or placement decisions. If I decide to withdraw permission after the study begins, I will notify the school of my decision.

If further information is needed regarding the research study, I can contact Mrs. Kathryn Teston at kmteston@liberty.edu, 770-993-1850, 10965 Woodstock Road, Roswell, GA 30075.

Signature

Parent

Date

Approved by: ____________________________ — Principal

[Teacher's signature]

[Teacher's name]
Appendix J: Child Assent Form – Public School

Assent of Child to Participate in a Research Study

What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?
The name of the study is Middle School Students' Perceptions of Teacher Approachability and the Influence of Those Perceptions on Student-Teacher Interactions. The Principal Investigator is Mrs. Kathryn Teston.

Why are we doing this study?
We are interested in studying how middle school students view their teachers as being approachable or not and then how the students' views factor in to whether or not they will approach their teachers about school-related matters.

Why are we asking you to be in this study?
You are being asked to be in this research study because you indicated on the screening questionnaire that you have had in the past or currently have a teacher(s) whom you view as unapproachable.

If you agree, what will happen?
If you are selected for this study, you will be asked to participate in an audio-recorded individual interview with the Principal Investigator (lasting about 30 minutes and conducted on campus), participate in a video-recorded focus group interview with the other participants at your school and the Principal Investigator (lasting 45-60 minutes and conducted on campus), and responding to questions from the Principal Investigator either in a hard copy journal or an electronic blog (your choice). After completion of the entire research study, you will receive a $25 iTunes gift card from the Principal Investigator.

Do you have to be in this study?
No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don't want to, it's OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It's up to you.

Do you have any questions?
You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

Signature of Child __________________________ Date ___________
Appendix K: One-Question Screening Questionnaire

Student's Name ________________________________ Grade: ____

Have you ever had a teacher you thought was unapproachable when you wanted to discuss a school-related matter?
   ____ yes          ____ no

Student's Name ________________________________ Grade: ____

Have you ever had a teacher you thought was unapproachable when you wanted to discuss a school-related matter?
   ____ yes          ____ no

Student's Name ________________________________ Grade: ____

Have you ever had a teacher you thought was unapproachable when you wanted to discuss a school-related matter?
   ____ yes          ____ no

Student's Name ________________________________ Grade: ____

Have you ever had a teacher you thought was unapproachable when you wanted to discuss a school-related matter?
   ____ yes          ____ no
Appendix L: Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name of student

2. Grade

3. Age

4. Gender

5. Ethnicity

6. Where were you born?

7. Who lives where you live (check all that apply)?
   Mother _____ Father _____
   Ages of siblings________________________________________
   Grandparent (s) _____
   Aunt(s) _____ Uncle(s) _____
   Cousin(s) _____

8. How long have you been at your current school?

9. What are the highest educational achievements of your parents and any older siblings?
   Mother    High School _____ College___ Masters _____ Doctorate____
   Father    High School _____ College ____ Masters ____ Doctorate ___
   Sibling   High School ____ College ____ Masters ___ Doctorate ____

10. What was the first language you learned?    Do you speak other languages?

11. How many schools have you attended before this year?

12. What extracurricular activities do you participate in?
13. Have you ever been homeschooled?

14. Do you have a diagnosed disability of any kind? If so, what?
Appendix M: Individual Interview Questions

Origins

1. Which parent (or family member) do you feel closest to and why?

2. Describe any differences you have noticed between your parents’ cultural upbringing and your friends’ parents.

3. When you were little and got hurt, whom did you typically go to for comfort?

4. What have your parents told you about their middle school teachers?

5. Who makes and who enforces the rules in your home?

6. When your family is together, what struggles or challenges at school do you discuss?

Adolescent Needs & Differences

7. In what ways should a student be able to feel safe in your school?

8. What would you recommend to a new student who wants to fit in to your school culture?

9. How are differences (gender, racial, interests, cultural, academic, maturity, preferences, etc.) generally viewed and treated at your school?

10. The word, “resilient” means to be able to recover from problems quickly. How resilient would you say you are in tough times? Can you give some examples of times you’ve had to be resilient?

11. How valued do you feel you and your ideas are when you’re at school?

Teacher-Student Relationships

12. If you were a teacher, what would you do to make sure your students knew that you liked them and that you were a safe person for them?
13. Imagine a teacher who you would approach and a teacher you would avoid. Give characteristics of both.

14. Mutual respect means that everyone shows proper respect for everyone else. How can a teacher encourage mutual respect in the classroom?

Self-efficacy, Self-determination, Self-advocacy

15. Describe yourself (your personality, your strengths and weaknesses, your friendship style…)

16. As a middle school student, to what extent do you feel you’re in control of daily decisions and your future direction?

17. What encourages you to speak up for yourself and why is it important?

18. If you see someone being picked on or bullied at school, what do you typically do?
Appendix N: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Which has been more fun for you – answering my questions about teacher approachability or getting out of class? Be honest! How was the interview different than what you expected it to be?

2. Other than the interviews with me, can you remember a time when you’ve been interviewed in the past because someone wanted to know what you thought or felt about something? If so, tell us about that time.

3. As you’ve thought through the interview questions and considered the most important factors that make a teacher seem approachable, what do you think most middle school students would list as characteristics or actions?

4. Why do you think these specific factors make your teachers seem approachable? What about these factors connect with students?

5. Do you think there are teachers who view themselves as approachable and students would disagree with that perception? What could teachers do to understand students’ perceptions of teacher approachability so that teacher perception and student reality were the same?

6. If you needed to talk to a teacher about an academic or behavioral matter, would you ask your parents to help you know what to say to your teacher? Why would you ask or not ask your parents for help?

7. When a teacher seems approachable, how do you decide whether or not you will interact with that teacher regarding issues that are important to you?

8. How does your personality type play into approaching or avoiding a teacher?

9. Have there been times when you thought a teacher was approachable, only to
discover that wasn’t the case when you tried to enter into a conversation with that teacher? What happened, how did you feel, and how did that interaction impact your perceptions of teacher approachability?
Appendix O: Journal/Blogging Prompts

1. Before your interview, what characteristics made you an avoider or approacher of teachers?

2. How do you feel you have developed a stronger tendency to approach or avoid your teachers whenever you have questions or concerns as a result of our interview and your awareness?

3. What could students do to help their teachers become more approachable?

4. What is to be gained and what is to be lost if students approach or avoid talking to their teachers?

5. If you were planning professional development for teachers at the beginning of the school year, what would you do to help the teachers with the approach/avoidance issue?

6. What do you want your parents or guardians to do to help you become better at self-advocacy?

7. What have you learned about yourself during your participation in this research study?

8. Do you feel you have acquired any life skills that will help you in high school, college, and your career or future?