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## Recent High School Graduates' Perspectives on the Practice of Teacher Empathy as an Approach to Engage Learners

Susanna Michelle Post  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Susanna Michelle Post

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Recent High School Graduates' Perspectives on the Practice of Teacher Empathy as an

Approach to Engage Learners

by

Susanna Michelle Post

MEd, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 2019

MA, University of Central Arkansas, 2017

BS, University of Arkansas, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Educational Administration and Leadership

Walden University

May 2026

## Abstract

The problem addressed through this study is that recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners have not been explored in an urban school district in a Southern state. Grounded in a conceptual framework that incorporates Kleinfeld's concept of warm demander pedagogy with Goleman's emotional intelligence theory, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. For this basic qualitative design, semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 recent high school graduates recruited through social media. Thematic analysis yielded the following five themes: recent high school graduates felt engaged by compassionate teachers who fostered trusting relationships, enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms, supportive teachers who held them to high expectations, and active teachers who invited discussion and collaboration, whereas recent high school graduates felt disengaged by demanding teachers who seemed not to care about their situations, needs, or views. School leaders might use the results of this study to promote positive social change by providing teacher training and evaluation focused on the practice of teacher empathy, which may strengthen student engagement and model how empathy builds relationships, connects communities, and shapes a more compassionate society.

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## Dedication

To my beloved Nana-Lou, my touchstone. Though you did not live to see this day, your encouragement made it possible. You were ahead of your time in so many ways - eloping with Papa just before the war and pursuing a college education when few women did. Later, you became a homemaker and my favorite place, always ready to catch up over a glass of sweet tea. I know you would be on the back porch with me now, eager to read every page of this work. Your legacy lives on in this accomplishment.

To my parents, Paul and Debra, who instilled in me from childhood the belief that I could do anything. Your unconditional love has guided me through every challenge, and I still marvel that the Lord gifted me with parents like you. The way you love others through your profession has shaped who I am as an educator. I love you!

To my husband, Frankie, and our children - Hayden, Hallie, and Harper - you have walked beside me through late nights, celebrations, and setbacks. You made me coffee, wrapped me in long hugs, and encouraged me when I needed it most. When I was up late writing, pictures of your faces kept me going. I am so grateful to do life with you, my favorite people in the world, and I love you more than I can say! This success is ours.

To my students, teacher-friends, ATOY/NNSTOY family, and personal warm demanders - your impact shaped my desire to study teacher empathy. Without you, this journey would never have been. I was told not to write about my passion work to avoid burnout, but nothing else seemed worthy, and your support in that meant everything.

And ultimately, to the Lord Jesus Christ, who showed the world through His life what it means to balance compassionate empathy with high expectations. Your strength carried me through. To You alone be the glory for every step of this journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teacher empathy is a social-emotional attribute that affects student learning outcomes (Aldrup et al., 2022; Connor & Cavendish, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Wang et al., 2022; Warren, 2018; Zhang, 2022). The practice of teacher empathy benefits both teachers and students by enhancing emotional well-being, reducing stress, strengthening confidence, and increasing effectiveness (Araya & Martin, 2022; Brackins, 2022; Cornelius-White, 2007; Munoz et al., 2022; Paulus & Meinken, 2022). Also, empathetic teachers are more effective at managing diverse or challenging students, contribute positively to students' social-emotional learning (Biçer et al., 2022; Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Jagers et al., 2019; Wink et al., 2021), and foster higher levels of academic achievement (Mchenry & Kelly, 2022; Nganga et al., 2021). Deficits in teacher empathy are evidenced by teachers' inability to understand their students' emotions, perspectives, and experiences, which may lead to irrelevant lessons, disengaged students, unmet learning needs, and punitive discipline measures (Aldrup et al., 2022; Havik & Westergård, 2019; Okonofua et al., 2016; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018). Empathy is a key characteristic of effective teachers and can lead to positive outcomes through stronger relationships, authentic student engagement, and increased academic success (Aldrup et al., 2022; Brackins, 2022; Hutton, 2022; Lee et al., 2018; Mchenry & Kelly, 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Roorda et al., 2017; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Zhang, 2022).

To address a gap in the practice of teacher empathy, this study explored the underrepresented perspectives of recent high school graduates on teacher empathy

(Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023). Understanding recent high school graduates' perspectives is necessary because research affirms the value of teacher empathy as a practice for increasing engagement and academic success among learners (Aldrup et al., 2022; Hutton, 2022; Lee et al., 2018; Mchenry & Kelly, 2022; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Zhang, 2022). This study elicits the perspectives of 18-year-old graduates who are still in the culminating stage of their adolescent years, a time when engagement can be challenging and relationships with teachers are crucial (Havik & Westergård, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017). Other studies have called for additional research that elevates high school students' perspectives regarding their experiences with empathetic teachers and how they can be most effectively engaged (Aldrup et al., 2022; Vomund & Miller, 2024). This study adds to the literature a representation of recent high school graduates' perspectives and experiences with the practice of teacher empathy, the merit of which has been shown, but the implementation of which is lacking (see Aldrup et al., 2022; Okonofua et al., 2016; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018).

The study's positive social change implications include a deeper understanding of the needs of high school students and clearer insight into the experiences graduates have had with the practice of teacher empathy in engaging them as learners. This knowledge may empower educational leaders to explore the practice of teacher empathy and pursue professional learning opportunities focused on helping teachers acquire new strategies that may increase their empathy. The results of this study may encourage teachers to cultivate empathy as an approach to better engage students and meet their unique learning needs.

In this chapter, I present the study's background, problem statement, purpose, research question, and conceptual framework. I also describe the nature of the study and present definitions, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. Finally, I discuss the study's significance in terms of its potential contributions to the discipline and to positive social change.

### **Background**

Many researchers have noted the importance of teacher empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022; Jaber et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024) and sought to define teacher empathy as an extension of general empathy specific to the context of an educational setting and the nuanced interactions within teacher-student relationships (Meyers et al., 2019; Rogers, 1969; Vomund & Miller, 2024). The word *empathy*, which Titchener introduced to the English language in 1909, originated from *emfühlung*, a word that means “feeling into” in the German language and can be used to describe one’s emotions as they figuratively step into a work of art or literature (Vischer, 1873). Nearly half a century after Titchener’s contribution, Allport (1954) defined empathy as the ability to understand both an individual and the individual’s perspective and was joined by Clark (1971) in advocating for empathy as key to solving the problem of racism in America. Clark identified empathy as a moral and ethical characteristic that is unique to humans. As psychologists worked to further this understanding of general empathy, educational researchers began exploring the potential impact of teacher empathy (Vomund, 2024). Dixon and Morse (1961) and Aspy (1961, 1975), as cited in Vomund (2024), found that the practice of teacher empathy was connected positively to students’

evaluations and learning; however, at the time, teacher empathy was based primarily on teachers' self-perceptions of their own abilities.

Although teacher–student relationships are bidirectional in nature, there is scant research on students' perspectives of the practice of teacher empathy (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017), resulting in a call for stronger representation of student voice (Aldrup et al., 2022; Cook-Sather, 2006; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023). The meager inclusion of students' perspectives reflects an ongoing power imbalance that has been an issue in education for decades (Delpit, 1988). As psychologists and educational researchers continued exploring empathy (Vomund, 2024), Delpit (1988) called out the “silenced dialogue” and the inadequate connections between educators and students, attributing classroom power dynamics to the silencing of student voice and perspective, especially among marginalized populations. However, as educational reformers seek to improve student outcomes, student voice is becoming valued as a key resource for determining what students need to succeed (Brackins, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2020). More recent work is beginning to highlight students' perspectives and feedback regarding the interpersonal outcomes of teacher empathy (Brackins, 2022; J. Ross et al., 2023; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Wang et al., 2022). However, peer-reviewed studies that recognize high school students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy have been underrepresented in the literature, which may partly be due to the inherent challenges of interviewing minors, given Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements and concerns regarding vulnerable populations.

Bryant (2019) explored the experiences of four high school students with the practice of teacher empathy through a phenomenological study. Although her dissertation is not peer-reviewed, Bryant's study is among the first to elicit the perspectives of high school students, providing evidence that intentional moments of practiced empathy created personal connections and feelings of value beyond academics, and calling for additional research on high school students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy. Two studies within the past 5 years have presented the perspectives of middle school students. Brackins (2022) explored middle school students' perceptions of teacher empathy and found that students valued the practice of teacher empathy as central to their personal and academic success. Wang et al. (2022) gathered questionnaire data from 755 middle school students and found that the students' perceptions of the practice of teacher empathy predicted their positive emotional experiences in learning. A recent study also brought to the literature the perspectives of college students: in a 2023 mixed-methods study, J. Ross et al. (2023) surveyed 168 college students and interviewed 19 additional students and found that students' assessments of the practice of teacher empathy were specific to race and grades. Despite manifest research on teacher empathy and its positive impacts, a gap in practice remains in applying teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners (Brackins, 2022; Connor & Cavendish, 2020; Nganga et al., 2021; J. Ross et al., 2023; Sandilos et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2022).

The research more thoroughly represents students' perspectives on other areas, including teacher effectiveness and student engagement, topics which are related to the practice of teacher empathy and students' feelings of connection to the teacher and to

each other (Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017). Bockmier-Sommers et al. (2017) found that students' perceptions of teachers' empathy and teachers' high esteem for their students were directly correlated to student engagement. One study that asked adult participants to recount impactful experiences with past teachers garnered 328 social media posts, which were categorized into either the head (content knowledge), heart (emotional support and empathy), or hands (real-world experience) categories (Allen et al., 2024). Of those responses, 42% pointed toward a significant impact from a teacher with heart who was inspiring, encouraging, empathetic, and inclusive (Allen et al., 2024). Another study in Chile investigated the perceptions of high school students regarding what makes a good teacher and revealed similar results: students desire teachers who are knowledgeable and empathetic (Almonacid-Fierro et al., 2021). Havik and Westergård (2019) studied students' perceptions of engagement and the impact of their teachers; the researchers found that students were more likely to report high engagement when they perceived their teachers as warm and caring, along with having high expectations. They also found that students reported unique perceptions of their engagement and needed their teacher's support to engage emotionally in that specific classroom (Havik & Westergård, 2019). Another notable finding from the study was that students' emotional engagement declined with age, leading Havik and Westergård to join other researchers in calling for studies that elicit students' perspectives, especially at the high school level, where academics and test scores are given greater emphasis.

The need for the practice of teacher empathy became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021; Newberry & Hinchcliff, 2024) as teachers and students

faced the fragility of life. Social media platforms revealed students' frustration with the lack of teachers' empathetic practices when they were forced to learn from home (Lerat, 2021). Students needed teachers to be authentic, empathetic, and supportive, but reported a lack of empathetic practices from teachers who claimed to understand them (Lerat, 2021). The deficit in the practice of teacher empathy, which had already been identified before the pandemic, resulted in additional deficits, including relevance, engagement, and effective discipline (Aldrup et al., 2022; Havik & Westergård, 2019; Okonofua et al., 2016; Warren, 2018). After the pandemic, as students returned to school and sat in classrooms with teachers again, the need for empathetic teaching practices to engage learners persisted as students struggled to reconnect with their teachers and learning (EdWeek Research Center, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Nganga et al., 2021).

This study is needed because, while teachers' perspectives of the practice of teacher empathy are represented in existing research, the perspectives of those in their classrooms remain largely unexplored (see Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023). This study elicits the perspectives of recent high school graduates, capturing their reflections and experiences as those uniquely positioned to represent the students whom educators strive to understand, motivate, and support (Hattie, 2015; Vomund & Miller, 2024). The literature on the practice of teacher empathy and student engagement could benefit greatly from the perspectives of recent high school graduates, since they have been the recipients of empathic classroom practices (Vomund & Miller, 2024) and offer a reliable source of feedback regarding the effectiveness of those practices (Hattie, 2015).

As a result of this study, educators may gain new insight into students' needs and experiences and better understand how the practice of teacher empathy has been used to engage them as learners. These perspectives may clarify whether teachers' interpersonal empathic outcomes benefit students personally (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Because researchers report a need for increased teacher empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022; Okonofua et al., 2016; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018), this study may lead educational leaders to consider professional learning opportunities to help teachers gain strategies to increase the practice of teacher empathy. This study may promote positive social change by building an understanding of high school graduates' different experiences, expanding educators' views on the practice of teacher empathy, and motivating educators to increase their empathy to meet students' needs.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that is addressed through this study is that recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners have not been explored in an urban school district in a Southern state. This problem is salient to the field of education because it addresses the underrepresentation of high school students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023). This study is focused on exploring the perspectives of recently graduated high school students, whereas other research studies have focused primarily on teachers' self-assessments, revealing that teachers often rank their practice of teacher empathy higher than their students do (Aldrup et al., 2022; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023). By

offering recent high school graduates' perspectives, this study may help align teachers' intentions and students' experiences and support stronger teacher-student relationships through effective empathy-based strategies.

This problem is pertinent to the field of education due to the persistent focus on engaging diverse students both academically and socio-emotionally (Aldrup et al., 2022; Banks & Smyth, 2021; Okonofua et al., 2016; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018). As classrooms become increasingly diverse, educators face ongoing challenges in engaging students while achievement disparities persist among our most vulnerable populations (Okonofua et al., 2016; Ware, 2006; Warren, 2018). In the aftermath of COVID-19, this problem has become increasingly relevant, as teachers seek strategies to engage students and close achievement gaps. Before schools were drastically disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, student engagement was already a significant concern (H. N. Chang & Cooney, 2024; Hodges, 2018). In 2018, Gallup published research that alerted educators to an alarming decline in engagement: while 74% of fifth graders reported being highly engaged in school, about half of middle school students reported feeling highly engaged, and nearly one-third of high schoolers reported feeling highly engaged (Hodges, 2018). Since the pandemic disrupted learning environments across the world, chronic absenteeism has been on the rise (H. N. Chang & Cooney, 2024). An analysis of absenteeism in public schools by the nonprofit Attendance Works found that during the 2021-22 school year, about 14.7 million students experienced chronic absenteeism (H. N. Chang & Cooney, 2024). That number represents approximately 30% of the student population and alerts educators to an absence rate that is twice the rate experienced pre-

pandemic, a disturbing and persistent trend that disrupts engagement not only for absent students, but also for present students and their teachers (H. N. Chang & Cooney, 2024).

Recent high school graduates' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners remain largely unexplored (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Nganga et al., 2021; Vomund & Miller, 2024). This deficit in perspective has subsequently contributed to a gap in the practice of teacher empathy and the persistence of students' unmet learning needs (Nganga et al., 2021). While educators continue to be affected by the challenges of increasingly diverse classrooms, gaps in the practice of teacher empathy may be most profound in classrooms representing the most vulnerable students (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024). The practice of teacher empathy has been shown to be an effective approach to engage students in learning (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024), and as a result, Nganga et al. (2021) encouraged teachers to understand students' perspectives in order to meet their learning needs through relevant, engaging practices.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. These perspectives from recent high school students have been underrepresented in the research, and their perceptions and experiences are an invaluable resource for stakeholders seeking relevant ways to engage students and ensure their success (Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023). As Ravitch and Carl (2021) iterated, qualitative research is vital in our current world

because it enables researchers to illuminate the untold stories of people and to develop an understanding of the complexities of their diverse experiences. This diversity called for research grounded in a constructivist paradigm.

Constructivism, a theory of knowing, is based on a construction of understanding (Hattie, 2008). This study acknowledges the subjective nature of reality, supports a social constructionist approach to understanding, highlights the underrepresentation of recent high school graduates' perspectives in the literature, and seeks to honor the narratives of how students have perceived the practice of teacher empathy (Cleaver & Ballantyne, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, seeking to understand these perspectives supports a constructivist epistemology (i.e., how one gains knowledge) and ontology (i.e., how one understands reality; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Although research supports the positive impact of empathetic teaching practices, a full understanding of the phenomenon of teacher empathy requires insights from the perspectives of recent students.

Curiosity regarding students' perspectives is the foundation for adaptive teacher empathy, a phrase coined by Vomund and Miller (2024) to describe teacher empathy as a practice that is responsive to students and effective in meeting their learning needs. Adaptive teacher empathy begins with a teacher's desire to understand the experiences and feelings of a student from that student's unique perspective (Vomund & Miller, 2024). This study will not only elevate recent graduates' perspectives but also seek their suggestions for improving practice. Research has documented positive interpersonal outcomes for teachers and students resulting from the practice of teacher empathy, including increased flexibility and reflective practice; however, additional research is

needed to expand this list (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Interviews with these recent high school graduates enabled me to collect rich, detailed information regarding their subjective realities as students.

This study may help educators understand the phenomenon of teacher empathy by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of individuals who have recently completed their K-12 education. Empathy is a key element of a teacher's social-emotional intelligence, and although empathy has been considered as strictly affective or cognitive, a holistic approach embraces elements of each (Aldrup et al., 2022; Vomund & Miller, 2024). The affective component of empathy enables teachers to feel emotions similar to their students' emotions, while the cognitive component of empathy allows teachers to understand those emotions (Aldrup et al., 2022; Vomund & Miller, 2024). Various phenomena have been considered as empathy or components of empathy, including the following: cognitive empathy (knowing another's feelings), affective empathy (matching another's feelings), facial empathy (reading nonverbal cues), situation projection, psychological empathy (perspective taking), decentering, compassion, and sympathy (Batson, 2009; Vomund & Miller, 2024). Although empathy is a multifaceted and complex concept (Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2013), it simply means one's capacity to understand and respond to another person's feelings or perspectives (Araya & Martin, 2022). It follows that teacher empathy is a teacher's capacity to understand and respond to their students' feelings and perspectives. This understanding of the phenomenon of teacher empathy supports research that teacher empathy extends beyond cognitive and affective processes that occur in the teacher's

brain to observable, responsive behaviors that students may perceive as empathy-related practices, and which should be included in research of the phenomenon (Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2013; Wink et al., 2021).

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: What are recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state?

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in Goleman's (1995) seminal work on emotional intelligence theory, which highlighted empathy and other components of a teacher's emotional intelligence as relevant skills for engaging students. Two decades earlier, Kleinfeld (1975) introduced the concept of warm demander pedagogy, which explains how effective teachers integrate empathy with high expectations to engage students. These classic works frame my study by grounding the research question in empathy-based theory and pedagogy.

Goleman (1995) developed a conceptual framework for emotional intelligence by identifying its key components and skills. Goleman elevated the importance of emotional intelligence alongside the traditional intelligence quotient by spotlighting the ability of emotionally intelligent individuals to successfully motivate others. This is central to my study because it affirms that how teachers practice empathy is a component of their emotional intelligence, which enables them to engage and motivate students. Kleinfeld

(1975) presented the concept of a warm demander through her research analyzing effective teachers in Alaska. Kleinfeld found that certain qualities, such as personal warmth (including empathy), combined with active demandingness (high expectations), were key characteristics of successful teachers. This is relevant to my study because the concept of warm demander pedagogy offers a framework for describing how teachers practice empathy to engage diverse students.

Although previous research has focused on the benefits of teaching students to be empathetic or teachers' self-perceptions of empathy, there is minimal research on students' perspectives (Aldrup et al., 2022; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023). Interviews with recent high school graduates generated data to increase this research and build upon earlier findings. The continued research and application of Goleman's (1995) theory and Kleinfeld's (1975) pedagogy could offer insight into the perceived impact of the practice of teacher empathy on student engagement and guidance on how empathy training could help teachers understand and support every student in their classrooms. This conceptual framework frames students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy to engage learners. The study offers insight to support the idea that a teacher's intelligence extends beyond cognitive abilities and that their empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, is a practice that is central to classroom success (Vomund & Miller, 2024). I discuss these connections in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The exploratory nature of this study was motivated by my desire to understand the perspectives of recent high school graduates regarding the practice of teacher empathy, a phenomenon that can compel teachers to move from understanding students' feelings to responsive interactions that foster engaged learning. A basic qualitative design focuses on human experiences and feelings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, to address the research question in this study, I selected a qualitative research paradigm because it enabled me to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives, experiences, and ideas regarding the ways teacher empathy has been practiced to engage them as learners. This approach aligned with the purpose of this study, enabled me to address the research question, and provided a pathway for data collection and analysis that emphasized an understanding of complex and nuanced human experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

A basic qualitative design enabled me to use semistructured interviews to gather in-depth information regarding the perspectives of recent high school graduates. High school graduates were selected for this study because they have 12 or more years of experience with teachers in a school and a rich history of experiences from which to share. Additionally, recent graduates remain in adolescence and can offer insight into the challenges of that period, when youth tend to disengage from learning in school, and teachers struggle to meet students' needs (Aldrup et al., 2022; Hodges, 2018). All the participants in this study were 18-year-old recent high school graduates and had attended a public high school in an urban school district in a Southern state. Data gathered from

interviews were coded to represent concepts and themes. I interpreted the data through the lens of the research question and the context of the conceptual framework.

### **Definitions**

*Emotional intelligence:* Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995).

*Teacher empathy:* Teacher empathy is the ability of teachers to use cognitive and affective processes to understand their students, respond to their students with behaviors that demonstrate care and concern, and work toward both intrapersonal outcomes (changes in belief or emotion) and interpersonal outcomes (supportive behaviors) to ensure students feel understood and valued as learners in their classrooms (Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024).

*Warm demander:* Warm demander describes a teaching style characterized by teachers who are caring toward their students, do not lower academic standards or expectations, and are effective disciplinarians (Kleinfeld, 1975; Sandilos et al., 2017).

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions underlie this qualitative study. The nature of qualitative research is concerned with interpreting human experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I wrote a research question that I expected would successfully elicit the participants' perspectives, experiences, and suggestions. I also assumed that semistructured interviews would garner the data I needed to successfully answer the research question. One interpretivist assumption that was necessary for the study was the belief that there are

multiple perspectives on a topic and that a participant's truth is based on their experiences with the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For the study, I assumed that the participants were reliable sources of information (Hattie, 2015) and answered the interview questions in a way that authentically represented their experiences with the topic. I did not incentivize participants, which should have encouraged honesty. Finally, I assumed that the participants had a basic understanding of what empathy is and were able to consider the practice of teacher empathy within the context of a classroom and their teacher-student relationships.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study extended to include recent high school graduates from an urban school district in a Southern state. The sample of graduates was selected from one high school, which narrowed the scope but enabled me to gather sufficient data to address the research problem and to contribute to the research a study exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners. The scope of the study addressed the problem of the underrepresentation of recent high school graduates' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy (see Aldrup et al., 2022; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023). The boundaries of this study were limited to 18-year-old recent high school graduates. Because the participants had reached the legal age of consent at the time of the study, they did not require parental assent or other IRB requirements specific to minors to participate. Additionally, because student engagement tends to decline after elementary school and becomes a serious concern in a student's high school years

(Hodges, 2018), I chose not to interview elementary or middle school students but focused on high school graduates. These 18-year-old recent graduates were likely to have experienced a personal decline in engagement throughout their middle and high school years or to have observed a decline in engagement among their peers. Because of their age and maturity, the selected participants were able to provide rich, nuanced information, allowing the study to present valuable data regarding engagement. Part of my decision to conduct research on the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners was informed by my own work in education. I have worked as a high school teacher with diverse student populations, have experienced firsthand the challenges of effectively engaging students, and value students' perspectives on how the practice of teacher empathy might improve education for all.

The first delimitation of the study was that participants were 18-year-old recent high school graduates who attended a public high school. I recruited only students from a public high school; students from home schools and private schools were not included. Another delimitation was that participants were selected solely from a school district in a Southern state; therefore, populations in other geographical locations or rural areas remain underrepresented in the literature. A third delimitation was the conceptual framework. I considered focusing on critical race theory and addressing the problem of engagement among minority students; however, I chose to keep the study more generally focused on all students.

Despite these delimitations, the results of this study may be transferable to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability refers to the application of qualitative

research to contexts that differ from or extend it (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Detailed descriptions of the data should enable readers to make comparisons with other contexts, including student populations in other grade bands, geographic areas, or nonpublic schools.

### **Limitations**

Despite the strengths of qualitative research, this design has inherent limitations. Qualitative studies are not intended to generalize to other populations or settings; rather, they aim to provide rich, context-specific data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. There were three limitations of the study, including sample size, transferability, and researcher bias.

This study was limited by a small sample size. Twelve recent high school graduates were selected through purposeful sampling for participation in semistructured interviews. Although the perspectives of the 12 graduates offered rich data, the small sample size made generalizing the outcomes more difficult than it would have been for a quantitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In addition, the sample was limited to public school graduates. A sample that included graduates from charter, private, and virtual schools might have elicited different data. However, generalization is not the goal of qualitative research, and detailed information enables transferability to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Researcher bias is another limitation characteristic of qualitative research.

Researcher bias can inadvertently shape all research, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I have experienced the effects of empathetic teaching practices as a student. I have experienced the effects of empathetic teaching practices as a teacher. I have observed the effects of empathetic teaching practices through my children. Additionally, I have observed the effects of empathetic teaching practices in my current evaluative role as a public school administrator. I brought my own beliefs about the practice of teacher empathy and its impact on student engagement to the research; however, I employed reflexive practices to minimize personal bias and ensure that the findings are representative of the participants' perspectives.

### **Significance**

This study is significant because it advances knowledge in the discipline by exploring the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners. By heeding the call of multiple researchers to prioritize students' perspectives (Aldrup et al., 2022; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ottenheym-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023; Vomund & Miller, 2024), this study contributes insight into how students perceive teacher empathy and how they experience the interpersonal outcomes of teacher empathy in ways that engage them as learners. This study may provide educators with a stronger awareness of students' needs by exploring their perspectives. Insight into the potential impact of empathetic teaching practices could influence teachers and educational leaders to broaden their view of teacher empathy as a social-emotional capacity that can be developed to increase student engagement (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Based on this

awareness, leaders in the field of education may prioritize professional learning opportunities to support teachers in developing strategies to increase their practice of teacher empathy. This study may promote positive social change by presenting participants' perspectives and experiences, thereby motivating educators to develop empathetic teaching practices to better meet students' unique needs. This study may also encourage educators to consider teacher empathy as a complex skill that can be learned, is unique to the classroom context and its students, and is based on teachers' beliefs, emotions, and actions in response to their students (Vomund & Miller, 2024).

### **Summary**

The problem that is addressed through this qualitative study is that recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners have not been explored in an urban school district in a Southern state. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that integrates Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy and Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory. I used a basic qualitative research design and interviewed 12 recent high school graduates. This research is central to addressing the decline in student engagement throughout the middle and high school years (Hodges, 2018), and the results of this study may bring about positive social change by offering educators insight into students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners.

In Chapter 2, a comprehensive review of the current research literature relevant to the study is presented. The literature review presents and categorizes findings from other studies related to students' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners. The review synthesizes the existing knowledge and offers context for the study. Chapter 2 also connects previous studies with the conceptual framework.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem this study addressed is that recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners have not been explored in an urban school district in a Southern state. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. The practice of teacher empathy plays a central role in successfully engaging students in learning; however, teachers often demonstrate a deficit in practicing empathy, a pertinent social-emotional ability, as evidenced by their struggle to identify their students' emotions (Aldrup et al., 2022). Nganga et al. (2021) noted that deficits in the practice of teacher empathy persist in schools, resulting in unmet learning needs among students. They recommended that teachers seek to understand their students' perspectives and experiences in order to be relevant and engaging and to meet the needs of all learners (Nganga et al., 2021). Research studies from Meyers et al. (2019) and Vomund and Miller (2024) have focused attention on the phenomenon of teacher empathy by providing a context-driven definition of teacher empathy, presenting strategies and policies to help communicate empathy to students and ensure they succeed academically, and affirming a need to understand the experiences individuals have had with their teachers. The literature review includes a description of the literature search strategy, an explanation and summary of the study's conceptual framework, and a review of relevant articles.

## Conceptual Framework

The concept that supports this study is Kleinfeld's (1975) warm demander pedagogy as an empathic approach to engage diverse learners. Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy described specific ways through which effective teachers exhibited empathy and successfully engaged their students. This relational approach to teaching was further developed through Goleman's (1995) theory of emotional intelligence, which asserted that intelligence is based on more than cognitive skills and intelligence quotient (IQ) and should include the emotional components of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Goleman stated that a teacher's emotional intelligence (including empathy) could lead to improved student behavior and academic performance.

Judith Kleinfeld first identified personal warmth and academic demand as key features of effective teaching in an ethnographical study, which presented her analysis of the behaviors of effective teachers with Indigenous students in Alaska (Kleinfeld, 1972). Kleinfeld's (1972) research initially referenced these highly effective teachers as supportive gadflies, describing their ability to combine personal warmth with persistent challenge. She later formalized this concept in a peer-reviewed journal article that presented her findings to the literature, rebranding supportive gadflies as warm demanders, and established what is now described as warm demander pedagogy (Kleinfeld, 1975). A warm demander is a teacher who exhibits personal warmth (including empathy) in cooperation with active demandingness (high expectations) toward their students (Kleinfeld, 1975). Kleinfeld (1975) found that successful teachers

shared two foundational characteristics: nonverbal behaviors that communicated the teachers' high levels of personal warmth and active demandingness that was grounded in personal concern for their students rather than the content matter. These warm demanders demonstrated their effectiveness through interpersonal behaviors like proximity, touch, affirming expressions, cultural awareness, and inclusivity (Kleinfeld, 1975). From this place of intentional care and concern for their students, warm demanders set high expectations and demanded that students achieve (Kleinfeld, 1975). Kleinfeld (1975) created a typology of teachers, comparing and contrasting a warm demander with three other types and placing each in a quadrant based on a scale of active demandingness (contrasted with passive leniency) and a scale of personal warmth (contrasted with professional distance). Kleinfeld's (1975) four types of teachers are as follows: a warm demander is warm and demanding; a traditionalist is distanced and demanding; a sophisticate is distanced and lenient; and a sentimentalist is warm and lenient. Kleinfeld (1975) showed that warm demanders who establish caring relationships with their students while insisting they achieve at high levels are the most effective teachers.

Since Kleinfeld's initial study in 1972, the concept of warm demander pedagogy has emerged in subsequent studies focused on the success of culturally diverse and marginalized students. In 2006, Ware revisited warm demander pedagogy and emphasized the importance of teachers balancing high expectations with warm support, especially for marginalized students. Ware noted that this supportive approach offered several benefits: students felt a sense of belonging, teachers built strong relationships with students, teachers acknowledged the students' cultures, and teachers ensured the

students' academic success through support. Ware found that warm demander pedagogy led to higher student engagement, increased motivation, and stronger academic achievement. Later, in 2009, Bonner addressed the academic success of African American students and found that this group responded well to teachers who were warm demanders. In addition to setting high expectations, Bonner described warm demanders as teachers who managed their classrooms firmly and communicated in culturally familiar ways. In 2014, Zaretta Hammond developed a teaching framework, Ready for Rigor, which was later expanded into a seminar, *Teaching with a Cultural Eye*, as part of the National Equity Project. Hammond, who studied brain science and culturally responsive teaching, advocated for warm demander pedagogy because diverse students thrive when they feel they have an established alliance with their teacher. Hammond drew connections among warm demander pedagogy, culturally responsive teaching, and brain science, suggesting that one's culture shapes how one processes information. Therefore, according to Hammond, teachers must be aware of how students' brains take in information, make sense of the information through their cultural connections, and store the information for later application. When students perceive their teachers as allies in this process, they offer those teachers the right to be demanding and set high expectations (Hammond, 2014). Hammond noted that the challenge for warm demanders is to make students feel relaxed but alert as they engage in rigorous learning situated within the zone of proximal development. In 2017, Sandilos et al. formally defined warm demander pedagogy as an approach to teaching through which students are

compassionately nurtured without sacrificing high academic standards or strict behavior expectations.

Daniel Goleman (1995) is a psychologist known for his expertise in emotional intelligence. Goleman defined emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize and understand feelings, manage emotions, and successfully motivate oneself and others. Based on his study of brain science, Goleman suggested that there are two distinct kinds of intelligence: emotional intelligence and rational intelligence. Although Goleman's work eventually connected to teaching practices, his theory was not focused on education or the academic success of marginalized students; rather, after studying the benefits of emotional intelligence in the workplace, Goleman found that his theory aligned with warm demander pedagogy and extended his research broadly to the world of education. Goleman emphasized that the warm demander approach used by effective teachers was grounded in elements of emotional intelligence, including empathy. Goleman noted that empathy originated in the English language from *empathia*, a Greek word that means feeling into and describes one's ability to understand another's experiences. He identified the importance of emotional awareness, understanding, and management, and he advocated for teachers to cultivate their own emotional intelligence while teaching students the five key competencies of the theory: emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Teachers help students feel emotionally safe by cultivating emotional intelligence in their classrooms, leading to higher engagement and ultimately higher academic success. Goleman found that a

teacher's emotional intelligence shares equal importance with their traditional IQ in their ability to motivate learners successfully.

Goleman's work was affirmed by the research of Cornelius-White (2007), who noted that effective teachers who embrace person-centered education demonstrate "teacher empathy (understanding), unconditional positive regard (warmth), genuineness (self-awareness), nondirectivity (student-initiated and student-regulated activities), and the encouragement of critical thinking (as opposed to traditional memory emphasis)" (p. 113). Cornelius-White also carefully described the similarities between classical, humanistic views of education and modern, constructivist views of education; the former have traditionally focused on teacher variables, while the latter have focused on student variables as the means to greater success. However, Cornelius-White asserted that when teachers implement person-centered education, the two approaches are similar in their emphasis on relational teacher behaviors that cultivate positive student behaviors.

The current study benefits from Kleinfeld's (1975) framework because she presents a person-centered pedagogy focused on teacher empathy as a distinguishing characteristic of effective teachers who engage students successfully. Kleinfeld explored whether certain practices led to increased engagement among students as evidenced by participation in discussions and content understanding. Kleinfeld found that the teaching practices of warm demanders created learning environments in which students were more engaged and successful. The concept of warm demander pedagogy offers a framework for describing how teachers use empathy to engage diverse students. Goleman's (1995) theory is relevant to this study because it affirms that teacher empathy is a component of

emotional intelligence, which enables teachers to engage and motivate their students. Kleinfeld's warm demander pedagogy aligns with Goleman's principles of emotional intelligence to frame my research on recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners. Both Kleinfeld and Goleman advocate for teachers to embrace empathy as a relational approach to teaching to help students achieve at high levels. Kleinfeld's pedagogy and Goleman's theory both suggest that teachers who demonstrate empathy, understanding, and support while also setting high standards for their students are more likely to foster a positive learning environment and facilitate student success.

Kleinfeld's (1975) warm demander pedagogy relates to the study's purpose and research question by explicitly focusing on the roles of teacher empathy and student engagement. The integration of warm demander pedagogy with emotional intelligence establishes a framework for exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives on how warm, demanding teachers with high emotional intelligence practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners. During data analysis, I will use this integrated framework to contextualize and interpret the graduates' perspectives, experiences, and suggestions.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The databases and websites used to find articles relevant to the study included Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis Online, APA PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Key words and phrases used in Boolean searches included the following: *empathy, teacher empathy, warm demander pedagogy, emotional intelligence, social and emotional learning, teacher-student relationships, engaging teaching*

*strategies, classroom engagement, diverse learners, student motivation, effective teaching, academic achievement, student success, empathic discipline, student perceptions, student perspectives, student experiences, teacher care.*

I searched for peer-reviewed articles. The articles that aligned with the study's purpose, addressed the study's problem, and supported the conceptual framework and theoretical foundation were reviewed to determine themes related to the study. Most articles were published between 2019 and 2024. However, some seminal works or works that were notable and germane in their ability to specifically address a topic related to the study's problem, purpose, or research question were also included. For example, Baskerville (2011) highlighted the power of storytelling as a unique empathic teaching strategy. Also of note, Okonofua et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study connecting the practice of teacher empathy to a significant reduction in school suspensions. Additionally, I included three older articles written by or with Carl Rogers, in which he argued that the practice of empathy and unconditional positive regard found in successful therapists can also be traits sought after in teachers (Rogers, 1969, 1992; Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Other older studies were literature reviews or meta-analyses relevant to the topics of empathy and engagement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Harbour et al., 2015; Hattie, 2008). Although warm demander pedagogy is strongly tied to culturally responsive teaching practices in many respects, this study is not specifically about culture. It was challenging to find sources that specifically addressed warm demander pedagogy. One study that I found was written by Ware in 2006. I also included Kleinfeld's (1975) research in which she coined the term warm demander and Goleman's

(1995) *Emotional Intelligence*, both of which are seminal studies that informed my conceptual framework.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

The literature supported three key concepts related to the study's purpose of exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners. The articles that aligned with the study's purpose, addressed the study's problem, and supported the conceptual framework were reviewed to determine themes related to the study. Three subtopics emerged from the review of the literature: teacher–student relationships, approaches to engage learners, and empathy in teaching.

#### **Teacher–Student Relationships**

Researchers have found that teacher–student relationships are a key consideration for motivating students to learn and ultimately for determining successful student outcomes (Eagan, 2023; Iver et al., 2022; Wentzel, 2022). Because of the strong influence relationships with teachers have on students, a focus on strengthening those relationships will help schools increase motivation, boost engagement, and elevate the academic success of students (Scales et al., 2020). Professor John Hattie (2023), a renowned educational researcher, has synthesized more than 2,100 meta-analyses to determine what elements most strongly influence student learning. He found that student–teacher relationships have an effect size significantly larger than the average effect size for student learning. He concluded that positive student–teacher relationships could lead to key gains in student learning. However, perspectives and opinions regarding student–

teacher relationships, as well as related variables such as student behavior, student engagement, and student competence, differed between students and teachers (Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023).

Although student–teacher relationships are pertinent, so are students’ perspectives of those relationships (Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023). Newcomer (2018) focused on understanding how students perceived their relationships with teachers and their experiences with those teachers to determine whether the relationships were authentically caring and positive. Newcomer found that students felt cared for by empathetic teachers who took the time to understand their experiences and to support them emotionally and academically. Student–teacher relationships influence whether students like school, student motivation and effort, perceptions of school climate, and grade point average (Scales et al., 2020; Thornberg et al., 2023). Students’ positive feelings toward school increased with warm and supportive teachers, showed a bidirectional relationship with student–teacher relationships, and led to increased student engagement (Thornberg et al., 2023).

As classrooms become increasingly diverse, teacher–student relationships are also central to ensuring the learning and success of marginalized populations. Pham et al. (2022) found that student–teacher relationships are strongly related to belonging, cognitive engagement, and behavioral engagement among students with increased support needs, including those receiving special education services and those identified as at risk. For these student populations, student engagement increased with student–teacher relationships characterized by trust, communication, and a sense of belonging (Pham et

al., 2022). Warren et al. (2020) researched the social and emotional competencies of high school teachers with their Black male students. These students were more successful when they had strong relationships with teachers who created inclusive classrooms and used culturally responsive pedagogy to connect them to the content in meaningful ways (Warren et al., 2020). Griffith et al. (2022) focused on the unfair treatment of Black adolescents in schools and the relational disconnects that result for many Black students, which are often followed by decreased engagement and school success. Newcomer (2018) found that Latinx students were better able to handle language, cultural, and socioeconomic challenges when they had the support of caring teachers. Relational, empathetic teaching practices not only fostered student engagement but also helped students feel cared for because their teachers understood their experiences and supported them emotionally and academically (Newcomer, 2018).

### ***Relationships***

In his meta-analysis, Hattie (2023) identified the following characteristics of student–teacher relationships that lead to increased student achievement: warmth, support, and caring; clear expectations with high standards; opportunities for student agency in learning; and effective feedback. In addition to those characteristics, other researchers found that empathy, respect, a positive climate, opportunities for student voice and choice, encouragement, and teacher enthusiasm led to students’ feelings of safety, the ability to ask questions and make mistakes, and academic success (Cornelius-White, 2007; Eagan, 2023; Hutton, 2022). Students described healthy relationships with teachers as those that feel authentic and reported valuing positive and respectful

communication, support, and opportunities to learn (Beaulieu, 2023). Graduate students reported that instructor-student relationships characterized by care, support, and nurturing were the most helpful and fostered a sense of family with their instructors (Delgado et al., 2020).

Engaging students emotionally depends on teachers' success in building relationships. Furrer and Skinner (2003) identified emotional engagement as explicitly influenced by relationships, noting that key relationships for students include relationships with peers, teachers, and parents, all of which have been shown to affect students' engagement. Because all of these relationships are important to students, a teacher's efforts at relationship building should extend beyond the classroom. Within the classroom, teachers should focus on creating supportive climates that encourage relational capacity. Teachers' efforts at building positive relationships with their students should begin with an awareness that learners engage when they feel safe, respected, and valued (Pedler et al., 2020). Iver et al. (2022) investigated the potential impact of professional learning that offered specific approaches to engage high school students; they found that teachers should focus on building relationships that motivate students and providing academic support when needed to ensure students can meet their goals. Because feelings of relatedness are a strong predictor of student engagement, teachers can use relationship building as an approach to increase student engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Relationships among students are important because of the effect they have on the learning environment. Kerr (2017) found that students' views of their learning

environment are key to their engagement; the learning environment is most affected by positive relationships and feelings of safety, which means that teachers need to know their students and demonstrate respect by listening, using relevant contexts, responding to opinion, encouraging learners' relationships, sharing emotions, and monitoring progress. Keyes and Heath (2023) noted that students' beliefs that they are part of a classroom of engaged learners are positively associated with trusting relationships, along with support systems to ensure learning, structure, and lesson organization. Teachers can engage learners relationally by offering opportunities for collaborative learning, which not only increases engagement as students share their ideas and perspectives but also enables students to develop a deeper, more meaningful comprehension of the content (Pedler et al., 2020).

### ***Strategies***

One approach found to be essential for student engagement is positive teacher–student relationships through which feelings of respect and support from teachers motivate students to learn (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Banks and Smyth (2021) noted that teachers build rapport with students by honoring them, treating them respectfully, and building positive relationships with them. For teachers, investing in relationships with their students leads to higher engagement in student learning and school success (Banks & Smyth, 2021). For students, feeling valued and respected is key to having a positively perceived relationship with their teachers (Banks & Smyth, 2021). There is a notable connection among teacher–student relationships, educational hope, and student engagement; the latter is positively associated with

supportive teacher–student relationships and educational hope, which refers to students’ beliefs that they can achieve academic success (Kit et al., 2022). This affirms the findings from Hattie (2023) that teacher–student relationships, including the relational dynamics between a teacher and a student or between students, have the potential to accelerate student learning and achievement.

For teachers trying to build relationships with marginalized students, Griffith et al. (2022) identified trustworthiness as a key characteristic for Black students because many have been subjected to unfair treatment, including being harshly punished, singled out, and disparaged. Teachers can help prevent these unfair treatments by building positive student–teacher relationships, which Gunersel et al. (2023) identified as a key component of effective classroom management. Bennett et al. (2023) identified culturally responsive language as a characteristic of strong student–teacher relationships that helps prevent conflict. In his research on Latinx students, Newcomer (2018) described authentic student–teacher relationships as grounded in respect, trust, and understanding, noting that these teachers worked to know their students, create warm classrooms, and support their students’ ambitions. Similarly, Warren et al. (2020) found that three social and emotional competencies of high school teachers were central for building relational capacity with Black male students: trust, respect, and empathy. Hutton (2022) identified an additional element that led to strong student–teacher relationships that could work to increase understanding and empathy for marginalized students: intentional connections to the student’s family and community.

Researchers identified specific strategies for building relationships with marginalized students as being more effective. For behaviorally challenging, exceptional students, Collins and Landrum (2023) advocated for the following strategies: positive greetings as students enter the classroom, increased opportunities for students to respond in class, reward systems to reinforce positive behavior, specific praise focused on student demonstration of expected behaviors, and student choice in what is learned, how it is learned, and how students are assessed. Collins and Landrum noted the importance of teachers' self-awareness regarding their own behavior and its impact on students who struggle to behave appropriately. Because many Black students have experienced unfair treatment in their schools, teachers should focus on trustworthiness as they work to build relationships and re-engage Black students (Griffith et al., 2022).

Because teacher–student relationships are an influential element in student success, teachers should prioritize building strong relationships with their students (Eagan, 2023). Wubbels and Brekelmans (2005) reviewed two decades of research and identified two key factors in building successful student–teacher relationships: the teacher's communication and mutual cooperation. When teachers work with students to build positive relationships, students have increased motivation, achievement, and social-emotional health (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005).

Teachers can play a salient role in building positive relationships with their students by creating a warm and supportive learning environment, setting clear expectations and high standards, providing opportunities for students to manage their own learning, and giving specific, timely, and actionable feedback (Hattie, 2023).

According to Hattie (2023), aside from teacher quality, the most influential element for student success is the quality of a teacher's relationships with students. Teachers can develop positive relationships with students by showing concern and interest in students' lives, communicating expectations clearly, demonstrating trustworthiness, building rapport, utilizing positive reinforcement, being warm and engaging, and validating their students' perspectives and experiences (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). Strong student–teacher relationships can lead to increased student motivation, improved student behaviors, and higher rates of learning and academic achievement; teachers can strengthen these relationships through empathy and personalized approaches (Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2023; Swan, 2021). Hutton (2022) found that teachers' empathy and attention to students were key elements that defined moments of connection and relational growth between teachers and students.

It is essential for teachers to strengthen student–teacher relationships because improving these relationships helps combat motivational decline among middle and high school students (Scales et al., 2020). Empathy is a component in creating and sustaining positive teacher–student relationships, which are vital to both teachers' and students' success. Students believe that healthy relationships with teachers can develop when teachers are respectful and responsive and provide space for collaboration (Beaulieu, 2023). Several strategies for building healthy relationships were identified in the literature. In a study focused on physical education teachers, researchers found that students appreciate teachers who speak authentically from their own lived experiences while not making assumptions about the experiences of their students and grow their

relationships through high expectations, consistency, intentional language, and creating the feeling of belonging on a team (Bennett et al., 2023).

### **Engaging Learners**

Teachers play a key role in engaging learners (Franklin & Harrington, 2019); however, they can be challenged to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners representing various learning styles and abilities (Pedler et al., 2020). Unfortunately, student engagement, which is central to students' academic success (Iver et al., 2022; Patall et al., 2018), declines at the secondary level and has thus become the focus of multiple studies. Decreased student engagement at the high school level is a national concern that disproportionately affects students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Iver et al., 2022). In an effort to address this educational crisis, researchers have worked to understand the complexities of engagement and to uncover educational practices that may help teachers increase student engagement.

In active learning classrooms, teachers need more than an engaging classroom design and a genuine desire to engage learners; they also need to embrace instructional practices shown to engage students, followed by reflection to evaluate their impact (Metzger & Langley, 2020). Harbour et al. (2015) reviewed the literature on teaching practices that effectively engage learners and found that engagement is comprised of three interconnected parts: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Davies et al. (2018) analyzed 720 articles and found that emotional and cognitive engagement were most significantly linked with student achievement. However, it follows that students who are emotionally and cognitively engaged would likely tend to engage behaviorally as a result.

Teachers can use various approaches to engage learners, including relationships with students, pedagogical strategies, and classroom management (Pedler et al., 2020).

Teachers who effectively engage learners do so in the following ways: their positive connections engage students emotionally with feelings of psychological identification and belonging, their rigorous instruction engages students cognitively by requiring students to apply strategies and effort to master concepts, and their activities engage students behaviorally through direct participation in class (Harbour et al., 2015; Pedler et al., 2020). Some strategies address all three types of engagement. For example, Cevikbas and Kaiser (2022) found that teachers who use flipped learning can increase students' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Flipped learning led students to actively participate, collaborate with their peers, ask questions, feel more confident, and show interest in mathematics (Cevikbas & Kaiser, 2022). Other approaches focus on one or two areas of engagement. Research clearly shows that engaging learners is a multidimensional concept, and for teachers to be successful in this complex task, they need research-based approaches to address their learners' emotions, perceptions, and behaviors (C.-F. Chang & Hall, 2022; Harbour et al., 2015).

### ***Socio-Emotional***

Engaging students emotionally begins with the teacher. C.-F. Chang and Hall (2022) found that the socio-emotional goals held by teachers influenced their students' classroom engagement. Teachers with a goal of social skill mastery and a growth mindset had more engaged students; moreover, teachers who had socio-emotional goals of either being liked or avoiding the loss of student connection showed little to no impact on

engaging students in their classrooms (C.-F. Chang & Hall, 2022). Jagers et al. (2019) emphasized that socio-emotional learning practices could be transformative in helping diverse students connect and engage. Eriksen and Bru (2023) verified that social-emotional competencies are connected to student engagement. For example, the ability of students to plan their schoolwork is a social-emotional competency that Eriksen and Bru found to have the greatest effect on student engagement. The emotional capacity of students, including their ability to self-regulate and build relationships, is linked to both emotional and behavioral engagement in learning. Understanding the importance of students' social-emotional skill set for academic engagement allows teachers to approach their students relationally and emphasize these strategies. Teachers should focus on social skill mastery for themselves and their students as an approach to engage all students in learning.

Empathy has been identified as another strategy for fostering emotional engagement among learners, as it enables teachers to eliminate discrimination, increase cultural acceptance, and, in turn, help students feel safe and supported in the classroom (Lee et al., 2018). Connor and Cavendish (2020) focused on the school experiences and perceptions of high school students with learning disabilities; they found that students became engaged in learning when teachers were empathetic and adept at motivating them. However, motivation and engagement are distinct, as noted by Davies et al. (2018); the former is a stimulus for the latter. Mchenry and Kelly (2022) conducted a study of a teacher preparation program focused on developing empathy and culturally responsive practices to create high-quality educators. Mchenry and Kelly found that a focus on the

practice of empathy was central for high-quality teaching that engaged all learners equitably. Additionally, empathic teachers and engaged students led to increased in student learning (Arghode et al., 2013). Bockmier-Sommers et al. (2017) categorized engagement into skills, interactions, emotional involvement, and performance, and found positive correlations between empathy and high regard across all four categories of engagement, and a strong correlation between interaction and emotional engagement. Because these relational components of empathy, high regard, and genuineness are associated with engagement, teachers should consider them as approaches to foster learners' engagement.

### ***Cognitive***

Cognitive engagement follows from the work teachers do to enable learners' emotional engagement by cultivating a safe classroom climate in which students take risks and ask questions (Banks & Smyth, 2021). Fostering a safe classroom culture in which students feel supported, respected, and challenged is key for teachers to engage learners (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). According to students, their perceptions of a positive learning environment are shaped by cognitive components such as clarity about their learning, challenging expectations, and aligned assessment, which lead to engagement (Farah & Al-Hattami, 2023).

Learners are able to maximize their engagement when the environment is safe, relationships are positive, expectations are high, and energy is focused on learning tasks (D. D. Ross et al., 2008). Teachers can be emotionally supportive while also creating cognitively engaging classrooms by providing students with clear expectations,

challenging goals, and supportive feedback (Franklin & Harrington, 2019). Autonomy-supportive teachers, as described by Patall et al. (2018), are those who engage students by honoring their preferences and developing their agency through decision-making. Student engagement increased when students felt that their teacher supported them as independent learners through choice (Patall et al., 2018). D. D. Ross et al. (2008) advocated for teachers to act as warm demanders, using insistence as a strategy to engage learners from a range of cultural backgrounds. Insistence is not intended to be a demanding, cold strategy to force student engagement; rather, it is meant to be a warm, caring way for teachers to express their belief that every student can and will learn (D. D. Ross et al., 2008). As a warm demander, a teacher can leverage their relational capacity to support their students' academic success. Celebrating academic success is a key part of cognitively engaging classrooms. Banks and Smyth (2021) noted that teachers successfully engage students by providing them with opportunities to succeed and by celebrating both small and large successes.

A teacher's ability to differentiate their instructional resources, approaches, and assessments is vital for engaging students and ensuring the success of all learners (Pedler et al., 2020). Iver et al. (2022) also noted the importance of differentiating curriculum by providing students with authentic, inquiry-based instructional resources and requiring students to be disciplined in solving relevant problems. Pedler et al. (2020) stated that teachers who integrate technology have more highly engaged students with richer learning opportunities that accommodate their diverse needs. One way teachers can engage students through technology is by using electronic or interactive resources (Pedler

et al., 2020). Durgungoz (2022) found that instructional videos created by teachers for their students led to higher student engagement as evidenced by completed work, content interest, and discussion. In addition, students reported that their engagement increased due to the videos because they felt connected to their teacher, empowered to learn at their own pace, and safe to ask questions (Durgungoz, 2022).

Because student engagement predicts academic achievement and social success, it is necessary for teachers to differentiate curriculum using effective instructional approaches that engage learners (Harbour et al., 2015). Harbour et al. (2015) emphasized three instructional practices that teachers can implement to increase engagement: modeling, response opportunities, and feedback. Modeling involves the teacher's use of explicit examples to clarify abstract concepts, allowing students to learn by observing and replicating the teacher's actions, thereby reducing confusion and clarifying learning (Harbour et al., 2015). The most effective modeling is sequenced through a teacher's examples, followed by guided practice and finally, independent practice (Harbour et al., 2015). Teachers best engage learners through modeling by asking students questions throughout the process and thinking aloud, enabling students to hear them as they verbalize connections (Harbour et al., 2015). Throughout the modeling process, it is pertinent that teachers provide students opportunities to respond (Harbour et al., 2015). These opportunities may arise from students' responses to academic questions or tasks and relate directly to improvements in student engagement and achievement (Harbour et al., 2015). The literature presented several other strategies that have been shown to engage students cognitively. Karge et al. (2011) identified the following instructional

approaches that invite learners to be active, curious, and engaged participants: Think-Pair-Share; Tell-Help-Check; Give-One, Get-One; and the Immediate Feedback Assessment. These were presented as strong approaches that lead to critical thinking and help learners feel supported (Karge et al., 2011). Adult learners became highly engaged when teachers used role-play to motivate them through inquiry and to support their emotional and cognitive needs (Kilgour et al., 2015). Another strategy that stood out as highly effective and engaging is the jigsaw method, a cooperative approach to teaching in which a topic is broken into subtopics, with students assigned as investigative experts. Hattie (2023) found that the jigsaw method has an effect size of 1.2 and the potential to accelerate student learning and achievement considerably.

The literature supported the importance of teachers engaging learners cognitively by differentiating curriculum through ongoing assessment and feedback. Harbour et al. (2015) noted that when teachers use more positive feedback, students are more highly engaged. Hattie and Timperley (2007) cite feedback as one of the most impactful strategies a teacher can use to affect student learning. Hattie (2023) defines feedback as the information a student receives that reduces discrepancies between what is understood, the learning goal, and the next steps in the learning process. When teachers use feedback to provide students with this specific information, they can considerably accelerate student learning with an effect size of 0.51 (Hattie, 2023). Hattie cites several learning influences within the feedback domain that had effect sizes showing the potential to accelerate student learning and achievement: productive failure (0.39), formative evaluation (0.40), peer assessment (0.41), feedback from tests (0.41), questioning (0.49),

and peer- and self-grading (0.54). Hattie found several more influences that had the potential to considerably accelerate student learning and achievement: feedback using technology (0.55), feedback for task/improving content (0.63), effects of standardized or classroom testing (0.63), alternative assessment methods (oral presentations, progress monitoring, portfolios, and performance methods) (0.67), classroom discussion (0.82), timely feedback (0.89), and feedback-positive/negative reinforcement and cues to move on (1.01). Teachers would benefit greatly from using these feedback strategies. Positive feedback not only enhances engagement but also strengthens teacher–student relationships and increases students’ motivation and satisfaction (Harbour et al., 2015). Feedback is most effective when teachers offer it in a specific, authentic, and timely manner (Harbour et al., 2015). In addition to providing students with feedback on their content knowledge, teachers should also provide feedback on their engagement levels and advise them on how they can improve (Pedler et al., 2020).

### ***Behavioral***

Engaging students behaviorally logically follows from teachers’ efforts to engage learners emotionally and cognitively. Keyes (2019) interviewed 31 tenth-grade students to explore what elements led to behavioral engagement and feelings of belonging in their favorite and least favorite classes from ninth grade. Keyes found that teachers could increase students’ sense of belonging and behavioral engagement by encouraging student participation through engaging teaching practices. Learning engagement tends to rise among students when teachers build trust through listening, prepare relevant lessons that make them feel seen and known, and provide authentic feedback (Keyes, 2019).

Teachers are central to engaging students behaviorally because their interactions with students shape students' motivation, participation, and learning (Pedler et al., 2020). Teachers can increase students' behavioral engagement and feelings of belonging by fostering positive relationships with and among students (Keyes, 2019). To engage all learners from various cultural backgrounds, teachers need to create a positive classroom environment characterized by respect, calm, clarity, focus, and minimal resistance (D. D. Ross et al., 2008).

The literature revealed several strategies that teachers can use to engage learners behaviorally. Middle school teachers reported the vital role of classroom management in engaging students; classroom management includes positive relationships, positive and negative reinforcement, reward systems, immediate and positive feedback, and consistent consequences (Gunersel et al., 2023). A teacher's ability to reduce disruptive behavior in the classroom has an effect size of 0.82 and the potential to considerably accelerate student learning and achievement by engaging students behaviorally and eliminating negative influences that might result from a student not feeling heard, becoming bored or frustrated, or losing focus (Hattie, 2023). Learning engagement is more likely when the teacher's approach to classroom management extends beyond addressing disruptive behavior (Keyes, 2019). Patall et al. (2018) found that the following scenarios led to increased student engagement: when students felt that teachers intentionally avoided boring learning activities; when students felt that their teacher supported them by considering their personal interests when designing learning activities; and when teachers explained the purpose, relevance, and importance of a learning activity. A teacher's use

of arranged seating is also key to building relationships in the classroom; students reported feeling more engaged when the teacher assigned seating for social learning, enabling students to provide peer support (Keyes, 2019).

Student engagement tends to increase when students feel supported socially and academically (Keyes, 2019). Student behavioral engagement increased when teachers provided time for students to ask questions during a learning activity (Patall et al., 2018). Farah and Al-Hattami (2023) found that students' perceptions of the learning environment were connected to their engagement. According to students, their perceptions of a positive learning environment are shaped by opportunities to collaborate and actively learn, as well as by a sense of respect and support (Farah & Al-Hattami, 2023), which in turn leads to behavioral engagement. High school represents a formative period of time during which students need peer relationships; therefore, teachers can successfully engage learners by supporting them in taking risks and building trust within the community of learners. A teacher's ability to foster a culture distinguished by strong classroom cohesion, or the feeling that everyone is working toward positive learning outcomes, has an effect size of 0.66 and the potential to considerably improve the pace of student learning and achievement (Hattie, 2023). It is pertinent that teachers actively model the engagement they wish to see in their learners (Pedler et al., 2020). Teachers can model engagement in the following ways: active participation, enthusiasm for the content, and attention devoted to monitoring and assessing student growth and achievement (Pedler et al., 2020).

Student engagement is a notable component of a successful education system. Not only does student engagement lead to students who experience higher levels of academic success (Patall et al., 2018), but it also leads to teachers reporting stronger career satisfaction and plans to remain in their positions (C.-F. Chang & Hall, 2022).

### **Empathy in Teaching**

Empathy has become a leading topic in education as educators have shifted from more traditional, teacher-directed instruction to student-centered approaches that aim to increase engagement and academic success (Berkovich, 2020; Fredricks, 2023). Carl Rogers, the psychologist who first conceptualized teacher empathy (Meyers et al., 2019), identified empathic understanding as a dynamic attribute of effective teachers who have been transformed into facilitators of student-centered learning (Rogers, 1969). Rogers (1992) defined effective teachers as learning facilitators who are genuine, practice empathy, and view their students with unconditional positive regard. Similarly, Hattie's (2023) comprehensive work on student achievement supports a person-centered approach to teaching and validates the effectiveness of caring, empathetic teachers who provide timely, supportive feedback. Because empathetic teachers can effectively embrace a different cultural perspective and respond to situations from that perspective (Goleman, 1995), they are emotionally intelligent, culturally responsive educators.

The literature associated teacher empathy with positive student-teacher relationships (Araya & Martin, 2022) and increased student engagement (Aldrup et al., 2022). After conducting a review of studies, Aldrup et al. (2022) identified a need for increased teacher empathy to better engage students and connected the practice of teacher

empathy to positive student outcomes. Because of these effects, it is central to understand how the practice of teacher empathy can impact student learning (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Empathy is complex and has been defined in countless ways, but at its foundation, empathy is understanding and responding to another's feelings (Araya & Martin, 2022). Ge et al. (2021) established that empathy is essential for successful relationships.

For empathy to have a positive relational impact, one must move beyond perspective-taking to connection; connection must be pursued with the intent to genuinely understand another's situation without judgment (Dash, 2023). Teaching and learning occur in complicated social environments through relationships and interactions (Ge et al., 2021), both of which are more successful when the participants practice empathy, as shown by Martinsone and Žydžiūnaite (2023) in their qualitative study of teachers in Latvia and Lithuania. Goleman (1995) identified empathy as one of the five characteristics of emotional intelligence and as a foundational people skill, noting that empathic individuals are better suited to caring professions such as teaching because they can discern others' needs. McAllister (2023) noted that research on empathy has tripled in the past two decades but voiced concern that the resulting shift in education has been toward a false form of empathy. Although teachers may genuinely seek to understand their students' lives, this may inadvertently lead to harmful or ineffective practices due to incorrect assumptions about their students' realities (McAllister, 2023). These challenges led Vomund and Miller (2024) to research empathy within the context of teaching and learning.

Vomund and Miller (2024) conducted their study to clarify what teacher empathy is and to define the process that occurs between a teacher's empathic understanding and a student's ultimate success in learning. Five years earlier, Meyers et al. (2019) explained that teacher empathy is more than a phenomenon among teachers; rather, it is a nuanced skill teachers can develop to balance caring deeply for students with maintaining a focus on learning. Vomund and Miller found that misunderstandings in the literature regarding teacher empathy or its impact on students stemmed from misconceptions about its process. Vomund and Miller acknowledged concerns in the literature related to teacher empathy, including perspective divergence, bias, pity, and lowered standards for marginalized learners; however, they presented teacher empathy as a promising reflective practice that ensures the success of all learners by prioritizing cognitive empathy. While affective empathy, through which a teacher shares a student's emotions, may lead to positive outcomes for students, Vomund and Miller found that impactful teacher empathy prioritizes cognitive empathy, through which a teacher works to understand a student's perspective. Vomund and Miller framed the process of teacher empathy as follows: a teacher transitions from internal empathic processes (understanding students' experiences or sharing in their emotions) to intrapersonal empathic outcomes (beliefs and emotions like genuine care and curiosity) to interpersonal empathic outcomes (behaviors like instructional flexibility), which ultimately leads to students' success.

### ***Expression***

Teacher empathy can be expressed to students through positive teacher–student relationships within the context of learning (Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller,

2024). Zhao et al. (2021) found that educators agreed that the practice of teacher empathy is crucial for building relationships with students. According to Wynn et al. (2022), because the role of empathy in teaching is relational, the practice of teacher empathy serves to facilitate positive connections between teachers and their increasingly diverse students. Swan (2021) studied the experiences of elementary teachers who sought to engage students through empathy by building relationships and found that empathetic teachers, motivated to know and understand their students, seek to connect to what their students think and feel while following through with needed social-emotional support (Swan, 2021). In his 2023 meta-analyses, Hattie untangled the intricacies of teacher–student relationships to explain that the skills required for positive relations are listening, empathy, caring, and positive regard. Hattie (2023) also emphasized that students’ perceptions of a teacher’s capacity to create positive relationships and employ effective instructional practices are what matter because students can decode what is communicated verbally and nonverbally. Vomund and Miller (2024) reiterated that students’ perceptions of their teachers’ empathic behaviors are the most relevant indicator of teachers’ empathy.

The practice of teacher empathy is associated with effective communication, both verbal and nonverbal, and it leads teachers to a better understanding of their students (Berkovich, 2020). Goroshit and Hen (2016) found that empathetic teachers are more successful communicators and motivators and exhibit higher moral standards. Berkovich (2020) sought to synthesize research on K-12 teacher empathy and found that communicating through empathy is a unique form of empathy, distinct from possessing

the trait of empathy, the state of being empathetic, or being in an empathetic relationship. Fletcher et al. (2023) identified the following characteristics of teacher empathy: effective communication using positive terminology; positive relationships; care and support; a warm environment; and trust through shared stories, morality, inclusivity, and listening. One unique way teachers can foster empathy through communication is by engaging in storytelling with their students, which creates pathways for students to understand the cultures and experiences of their teachers and peers (Baskerville, 2011). Empathetic teachers are also able to connect their classrooms with home by listening attentively to concerned parents and by communicating more effectively through being kind, respectful, and fair, as shown by Martinsone and Žydzīūnaite (2023) in their international study of teachers, demonstrating that these practices extend to European contexts. Ultimately, empathetic teachers value communication because it leads to a positive classroom climate characterized by feelings of appreciation (Paulus & Meinken, 2022).

Noddings (2003) advocated for teachers to embrace an ethic of caring, valuing the importance of their students over the importance of the content. It does not follow that academic success must be sacrificed for caring. While caring deeply about students' emotions, attempting to understand their situations, and responding with compassion, empathetic teachers can remain focused on successful learning for each student (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Meyers et al. (2019) asserted that while sympathetic teachers may lower standards out of pity, empathetic teachers raise standards and remove obstacles out of belief in their students' abilities. These teachers act as warm demanders, insisting that their students rise to the challenge and work hard to achieve their full potential

(Kleinfeld, 1975; Ware, 2006). McAllister and Irvine (2002) conducted a study, revisited over two decades later by McAllister (2023), in which 34 teachers described empathy as a key component of their ability to engage diverse students effectively through multicultural practices. Zhang (2022) reviewed the literature on teacher empathy and student engagement and found a significant positive relationship between them. Warren (2018) focused on teacher empathy as an observable behavior that should be demonstrated through culturally responsive teaching to engage diverse students successfully. Ware (2006) affirmed the need for a warm, demanding approach for African American students. Nganga et al. (2021) explored minority students' experiences and found that empathetic teachers had a positive effect on their academic achievement. Nganga et al. emphasized the practice of empathy through culturally relevant pedagogy as key to the success of all students.

Zembylas et al. (2020) defined two types of empathy: the cognitive ability of perspective-taking and the affective ability to imagine another's feelings. Warren (2018) viewed perspective-taking as the means through which a teacher can develop an empathetic disposition, know their students, and be more culturally responsive. Teachers who empathize with their students are stronger because they understand their students' emotions and motivations (Paulus & Meinken, 2022). Martinsone & Žydzīūnaite (2023) showed from a European context that when teachers understand their students' perspectives, they can practice empathy to help students connect with their subject matter. Zembylas et al. worked to understand the use of teacher empathy for learning about the holocaust in Cyprus and acknowledged the importance of historical empathy,

with its cognitive and affective components. Zembylas et al. found evidence that empathy can be conceptualized as unsettlement and disruption when students are learning about traumatic events, which may lead them to become ethically committed to the cause of those who suffered. Taking the perspective of students is a core approach for teachers to express and develop their cognitive empathy (Brackins, 2022; Fletcher et al., 2023), so they can motivate and engage students with content in a meaningful way.

Carl Rogers believed that teacher empathy and the understanding it brings are powerful, so he challenged teachers to respond once daily to a student's feelings with support and empathy (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). Teachers in Lithuania and Latvia showed that teachers practicing empathy support students through struggles both personally and academically (Martinsone & Žydžiūnaite, 2023). Empathetic teachers are better able to respond to their students academically with specific feedback relevant to their learning (Paulus & Meinken, 2022) and understand the importance of providing students with timely feedback to ensure they have the support they need to learn at high levels (Martinsone & Žydžiūnaite, 2023). Wang et al. (2022) studied the relationship between teacher empathy and academic emotions, which surface in students during learning and are tied to academic performance, to determine if teacher empathy led to higher student success. Wang et al. found that students' positive academic emotions were predicted by perceived teacher empathy and that students' emotion regulation ability mediated the relationship. It can take time for teachers to know their students, but they should empathetically engage with them as quickly as possible to demonstrate their support and positive regard. Brackins (2022) found that teacher engagement is a key

element necessary for teachers to interact with their students through positive intentions and efforts at understanding. As Fletcher et al. (2023) observed teachers' empathic responses toward their students, they noted that these interactions grew and developed over time. Ultimately, empathetic teachers can better understand their students, are more responsive to their needs, and achieve higher levels of motivation and engagement in their classrooms (Zhang, 2022).

Empathetic teachers are flexible and willing to change their mindsets to accommodate their students' learning needs (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Teacher empathy led teachers to humanize their students by considering their personal circumstances, assessing their needs, and adjusting their approach to support student success (Bettencourt et al., 2023). Empathetic teachers are aware of their students' needs and are willing to make adjustments to ensure their learning. The COVID-19 pandemic led to positive growth in the field of education by challenging teachers to become more empathetic. Wynn et al. (2022) discovered unanimous agreement among educators that the COVID-19 pandemic had led them to be more flexible and to adopt empathetic approaches that helped students succeed. Bettencourt et al. (2023) explored how teachers in higher education responded with empathy toward at-risk students to engage them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers responded empathetically by better understanding students' needs and offering students flexibility in both achievement expectations and course policies (Bettencourt et al., 2023).

### *Strategy*

Because teacher empathy fosters a desire to understand students, it strengthens connections between teachers and students and leads to a positive climate (Araya & Martin, 2022). Kanbur and Kirikkaleli (2023) established a connection between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom management, showing that teachers with high emotional intelligence who practiced empathy were more effective at managing a classroom. In their European study, Martinsone and Žydzūnaite (2023) showed that empathetic teachers are able to leverage their emotional intelligence to establish and sustain a positive classroom culture, which is a central component of effective classroom management. Zhao et al. (2021) found consensus among educators that the practice of teacher empathy leads to positive learning environments. Teachers employ empathy to understand their students and utilize that knowledge to design effective classroom management strategies (Vomund & Miller, 2024). Hattie (2023) stressed that climate supersedes structure in a classroom and challenged teachers to model empathy, celebrate students' errors as they learn, support understanding, and have high expectations. Bockmier-Sommers et al. (2017) cited the following strategies for engaging learners by reinforcing empathy, genuineness, and high regard: prompt responses to questions, increased communication, teacher availability, and instructional strategies that foster interaction and collaboration among the students.

Because students have the emotional skill set to decode what teachers communicate verbally and nonverbally, it is pertinent for students to have authentic trust with their teachers in an environment that is marked by empathy and safety. Jordan and

Schwartz (2018) defined radical teacher empathy as an influence so strong that students view feedback and assessment as an opportunity to improve, not to be shamed. This ability of empathetic teachers to manage classrooms is pertinent because it opens the doors to learning without fear. Empathetic teachers are person-centered teachers who can embrace a student's perspective, create a warm climate, and demonstrate the instructional agility necessary to meet their needs. Empathetic teachers who create these safe, positive climates while also holding students to high expectations model what Kleinfeld (1975) calls warm demanders.

An empathy intervention helped teachers build stronger relationships with students, resulting in reduced student suspensions and increased levels of student-teacher respect (Okonofua et al., 2016). Teachers who prioritize empathic engagement can also eliminate discrimination for marginalized students (Swan, 2021). Okonofua et al. highlighted teacher empathy as an approach to negate the impact of suspensions and punitive discipline on students, especially Black males. Teachers who adopt an empathic mindset are more likely to respond to student misbehavior constructively (Okonofua et al., 2016). Because empathetic teachers are better able to identify social issues between students, they respond more quickly and effectively to eliminate potential bullying situations (Paulus & Meinken, 2022). Empathetic teachers create positive learning environments to make all students feel safe and supported (Zhang, 2022). This approach to classroom management can help reduce students' anxiety and stress levels, thereby empowering them to engage more strongly in the learning (Zhang, 2022).

Teachers who practice empathy often embrace collaboration and function well on teams (Swan, 2021). Empathy in teaching benefits students and adults by enabling teachers to be better problem-solvers (Paulus & Meinken, 2022). As shown in European contexts, empathy also supports teachers in working alongside colleagues to creatively address situations and make decisions (Martinsone & Žydžiūnaite, 2023). Teachers who practice empathy can involve parents in effective problem-solving by listening attentively to their concerns and working toward a solution that benefits students (Martinsone & Žydžiūnaite, 2023).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature confirmed the overwhelming benefits of teachers who practice empathy for students and their families. Additionally, there are personal benefits to being an empathetic teacher, including reduced stress, a more positive attitude toward diverse or challenging students, more effective communication, and better problem-solving skills (Araya & Martin, 2022). Wink et al. (2021) noted that teachers exhibiting high cognitive empathy were more positive and better able to address challenging students. Practicing teacher empathy enables teachers to deeply understand how their students process information and learn (Araya & Martin, 2022; Vomund & Miller, 2024). Goroshit and Hen (2016) described a connection between self-efficacy and empathy and reported that teachers with social-emotional competence are also confident in their effectiveness. Empathetic teachers are strong in this key social-emotional competency and are instrumental in promoting social-emotional learning for their students (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). Few studies have referenced negative impacts from teacher empathy, with

researchers citing affective empathy as the cause: the emotional connection from affective empathy can lead teachers to empathic distress, negativity, burnout, decreased efficacy, pity, bias, lowered expectations, and disparate outcomes (Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Wink et al., 2021).

The positive effects of practicing teacher empathy offer stakeholders encouragement. In his meta-analysis, Cornelius-White (2007) found that warm, trusting teacher–student relationships based on empathy predicted student success across multiple indicators: self-efficacy, academic achievement, school attendance, social skills, agency, active participation, and inquiry. The practice of teacher empathy is a notable predictor of students’ emotional well-being, positive behavior, and academic achievement (Paulus & Meinken, 2022). After analyzing data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019), Cai et al. (2022) affirmed a relationship between the practice of teacher empathy and reading achievement, both directly and through students’ feelings of belonging. Munoz et al. (2022) studied the practice of teacher empathy alongside students’ stress levels and found that when teachers engaged in empathetic practices, they supported students by mitigating unnecessary barriers and increasing their students’ feelings of well-being. Brackins (2022) explored the perspectives of middle school students in Christian schools and their experiences with teachers who practiced empathy; he found that empathetic teaching practices led students to stronger teacher–student relationships, greater confidence, reduced stress, increased academic excitement, long-term improvements in academic motivation, and overall well-being. After conducting a review of the literature

on the relationships among empathy, self-efficacy, and academic achievement, Dash (2023) found that empathy and self-efficacy are the most influential elements contributing to students' success.

Since researchers in the field of education have begun to focus on emotional intelligence, they have posited that teacher empathy is an important, if not essential, disposition (Berkovich, 2020). The practice of teacher empathy impacts students and teachers in a mutually beneficial cycle. Vomund and Miller (2024) presented teacher empathy as a process through which a teacher's internal processes (affective or cognitive) transition to intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes that foster student success. Empathetic teachers are more likely to encourage students to embrace empathy and build positive relationships (Goroshit & Hen, 2016), thereby fostering inclusive classrooms in which students feel supported and experience increased academic performance (Araya & Martin, 2022; Meyers et al., 2019). Although the practice of teacher empathy has been associated with numerous positive outcomes, research on how to develop it is limited (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). This literature review identified numerous strategies that empathetic teachers practice in their own learning environments. Because empathy is central to successful teaching, it should be taught and developed among aspiring teachers (Jaber et al., 2018). Zhao et al. (2021) found that most educators considered empathy to be an intrinsic human capacity but also believed it could be learned and developed as a practice. Paulus and Meinken (2022) conducted empathy training to promote perspective-taking among student teachers and found that the training increased perspective-taking ability and positive attitudes toward addressing problems. Recent high school graduates'

perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy have been underrepresented in the literature (Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023) but could greatly support future efforts to develop empathetic teaching practices (Hattie, 2015). This study addresses the gap in the practice of teacher empathy by using a qualitative methodology to explore the perspectives of recent high school graduates. This methodology is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. By examining this topic, the study offers unique insight into the ways teacher empathy is practiced from the perspectives of those whom teachers seek to engage. This study illuminates the perceived influence of the practice of teacher empathy on student engagement and offers guidance on ways that empathy training could help teachers understand and support every student in their classrooms.

In Chapter 3, I present four sections that outline the methodology used in this study. First, I identify the research design and rationale, including the research question, the phenomenon, and the research tradition. I also describe my role as the researcher, stating how I will manage relationships and bias. In the methodology section, I explain participant selection, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis plan. The chapter also includes the measures I took as a precaution to address ethical concerns and ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question addressed through this study is, "What are recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state?" The research question was written to elevate student voice and to promote insight into recent high school graduates' perceptions, experiences, and suggestions. The study's research question guided the research design and guaranteed that the study remained focused on the

purpose. Researchers have called for a more refined understanding of the practice of teacher empathy within the context of students' relationships with their teachers and experiences within the school environment (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018). This study gathers information from participants who have experiences with the phenomenon of teacher empathy, a social-emotional capacity which teachers can practice to understand and respond to students and engage them in learning (Aldrup et al., 2022; Connor & Cavendish, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Wang et al., 2022; Warren, 2018; Zhang, 2022).

To explore the practice of teacher empathy and to address the research question in this study, I employed a qualitative methodology. Other researchers who have studied the practice of teacher empathy have used quantitative methods and found connections between the practice of teacher empathy and positive student outcomes, with recommendations that future studies seek to connect the practice of teacher empathy to other outcomes, including student engagement and learning (Aldrup et al., 2022; Fletcher et al., 2023; Okonofua et al., 2016; Zhang, 2022). Although I considered a quantitative study to test those relationships, I decided to adopt a qualitative approach to address the existing gap in the practice of teacher empathy by exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy. Qualitative research employs an interpretivist framework to collect data from participants in an effort to explain their subjective experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This approach challenges qualitative researchers to focus on human feelings and to understand people's experiences with

phenomena in complex and contextualized ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). At the most foundational level, qualitative researchers gather words as data, whereas quantitative researchers gather numbers as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative researcher, motivated by curiosity about others' perspectives, engages in active listening and precise questioning to clearly understand their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative research paradigms are based on the idea of constructing knowledge through a growing understanding of people's experiences, whereas quantitative research paradigms are based on the discovery of existing knowledge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because the purpose of this study and the focus of the research question is to explore nuanced and complex human perspectives, a qualitative tradition aligns with this purpose and provides a framework for gathering words as a rich data source for analysis and insight into the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Within qualitative research methodology, several designs can be considered as approaches for addressing the research question. Four qualitative designs that I considered but did not select were phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, and case study. In phenomenology, the goal of the study is to describe the nature and meaning of the participants' lived experiences and to focus on observing the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that a phenomenologist often portrays the essence of intense emotional experiences that humans share, such as anger or love. The goal of phenomenological studies is to reveal the cognitive processes of participants who share

an experience so readers have a strong sense of what it must be like to experience the phenomenon (Worthington, 2013). I did not choose this design because it does not align with the research question, which seeks to gather data more broadly based on recent high school graduates' perspectives and to connect the phenomenon in practical ways to engaging learning experiences. Also, I did not seek to observe the phenomenon or focus on understanding its essence; rather, I sought to offer insight into the perspectives of its applied practice (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Another qualitative research design is ethnography. Ethnographic studies provide researchers with a framework to focus on a specific cultural group (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Ethnographies enable research to be conducted over prolonged timeframes, allowing researchers to deeply examine a collective culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ethnography emphasizes immersion in which the researcher spends time on-site observing the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This design was also not well-suited to my research, because I was not focused on a specific cultural setting. I was not seeking to understand the participants' culture or the shared behaviors of the participants. Rather, I aimed to explore the participants' individual perspectives to answer the research question.

Another consideration for the qualitative research design was a narrative approach. Narrative research uses storytelling to determine the meaning of an individual's life experiences (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, narrative research typically emphasizes the lives of one or two participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Also, narrative researchers focus on chronologically ordering the participants' experiences by life stage (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Although exploring recent high school graduates'

perspectives could be achieved through storytelling, I was not focused on exploring the graduates' life stories in a historical sense (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My goal for the study was to explore their perspectives on the practice of the phenomenon within the specific context of learning. I did not ask participants to sequence events in a chronological fashion.

A case study is another qualitative design that I considered. Case studies are designed to enable researchers to describe, analyze, and understand a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach to qualitative research may mean that participants are part of a specific group of people or an institution. Researchers conducting a case study typically choose a community or an institution that defines the boundaries of the case or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The research for a case study typically involves several data sources, including interviews, focus groups, artifacts, and direct observations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A case study would be more effective for studying a specific educational intervention or another bounded system (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This study focuses on individual perspectives rather than a system. For these reasons, a case study did not align with my research purpose or questions.

For this study, I chose a basic qualitative design. The majority of qualitative research studies are conducted through basic qualitative designs (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Sometimes referred to as a general qualitative study or an interpretive study, a basic qualitative study is grounded in phenomenology and constructionism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It provides the researcher with a framework for exploring the participants'

experiences, making sense of them, and uncovering the processes involved (Worthington, 2013). This approach to qualitative research can be especially helpful within the field of education by encouraging a deep understanding of effective processes and practices in teaching and learning (Worthington, 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that qualitative researchers set forth to discern the *emic* (insider's perspective) rather than the *etic* (outsider's perspective). This approach best supported the purpose of my research by enabling me to explore the emic, the perspectives of recent high school graduates as they described their subjective experiences with the practice of teacher empathy. After gathering data through semistructured interviews, the basic qualitative design provides the flexibility needed for analysis, interpretation, and answering the research question successfully.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher included initiating and managing every aspect of this basic qualitative study. I identified the practice of teacher empathy as a relevant research topic, focused the study on exploring the topic from recent high school graduates' perspectives, summarized existing literature related to the topic, created a conceptual framework as a contextual lens, generated interview questions and protocols, recruited participants, analyzed data gathered from semistructured interviews, and interpreted the findings. This role is significant in a qualitative study because the researcher is the primary instrument of their research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Babbie (2017) highlighted that one strength of the qualitative researcher's role is the depth of insight the researcher can gain by studying the "subtle nuances in attitudes and

behaviors” of people (Babbie, 2017). As both an observer and interviewer, I collected data by focusing on the experiences and feelings of humans (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As I interviewed participants, I observed their communication as they responded to the prompts. Their interactions included verbal and nonverbal communication (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A basic qualitative study offers the researcher flexibility to adapt and clarify as needed; the challenge in that role is that the researcher must work to monitor their own perspectives and personal biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As I observed the participants’ interactions, I documented my perceptions while carefully monitoring my own implicit biases.

A central part of my role as the researcher in this study was managing the safety of the participants. Therefore, I considered positionality - my identity and role - in the school from which participants were selected (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I chose to recruit recent high school graduates who had reached the age of 18 as a way to represent the perspectives of students. This strategy enabled me to elevate the student perspective while also ensuring the participants were adults who could provide informed consent. Honoring participants’ prior high school graduation status before recruitment also helped participants feel safe expressing their perspectives and sharing their experiences. By interviewing recent high school graduates rather than high school students, I minimized vulnerability and provided protection. Because participants were recruited from a high school where I am employed, I worked to ensure that my position did not create any obligation to participate or influence their interview responses. Although I have supervisory responsibilities at the school, I was assigned to a class of younger students

for whom I had disciplinary oversight. To uphold the integrity of this study, I ensured that I had no external relationships with the participants outside of the study. I also made sure that I had no prior disciplinary interactions with the participants. Additionally, I went above and beyond to communicate the voluntary nature of participation, emphasized that a choice not to participate at any time before or during the study posed no threat of consequence, and reiterated the confidentiality and anonymity of the study and data. Any interactions with the participants were strictly related to the study. In addition, participants did not receive an incentive for participation, thereby ensuring that their participation was low risk. These measures helped mitigate the participants' perceptions of a power differential in the study and protected them from the risks of any harm.

Other considerations in my role as the researcher included the biases and assumptions that may have influenced my interpretations of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I understand that my own personal beliefs and experiences influenced my approach to this study. It is necessary for researchers to recognize their own biases and to practice reflexivity as they interpret data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I engaged in reflexivity throughout the study by considering and reflecting on my positionality, subjectivity, and social identity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I am a White female and have worked for 11 years as a math teacher, curriculum coordinator, and assistant principal. As a teacher in an alternative high school, I practiced teacher empathy to engage marginalized students in ways that led to professional recognition in the field of education. These teaching experiences influenced my belief that the practice of teacher empathy is essential and

motivated my interest in exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy. Cognizant of my bias in this area, I worked to ensure participants felt comfortable sharing their perspectives while remaining neutral regarding my responses to their experiences. Lambert (2012) advised researchers to refrain from feeling drawn into agreement with their interviewees. During the interviews and data analysis, I monitored personal biases and embraced the challenge of neutrality by journaling. The practice of reflexivity supported my neutrality through reflection and enabled me to maintain trustworthiness and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Obtaining consent from each participant helped ensure the safety of the participants. The graduates confirmed they had reached the age of 18 at the time of the study and were able to provide their own consent as adults. Consent for this study was voluntary and informed, meaning participants were provided a clear understanding of the research, its purposes, and what they were being asked to do (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I received approval from the school district's superintendent and the school's principal to recruit participants using social media platforms, digital announcement boards, and bulletin boards in the building. Participants received no incentives for their participation in the study. Their participation was completely voluntary.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

Participants in the study included 12 recent high school graduates who had reached the age of 18 and had been educated in a public school setting in an urban school district in a Southern state. The school district has approximately 14,000 students in

grades K-12. The high school serves over 2,000 students in grades 9–12. The graduating class had approximately 500 students. The participants were uniquely positioned both as adults who were able to provide consent and as high school graduates who could draw from recent experiences with the practice of teacher empathy. Their vantage point as people who are still in adolescence offered timely insight into a period when many students disengage from learning in school (Aldrup et al., 2022; Hodges, 2018).

I used purposeful sampling to select the participants from a pool of approximately 500 students who were 18 years old and had recently graduated from high school. Purposeful sampling, the predominant approach to sampling in qualitative research (Patton, 2015), enabled my own discernment to help guide participant selection (Habib et al., 2014). Also known as strategic sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) or judgment sampling, purposeful sampling relies on the researcher's sound judgment to select participants who are representative of the population under study (Habib et al., 2014). Throughout the participant selection process, I engaged in reflexivity by considering my positionality, subjectivity, and social identity, and by journaling about my decisions for participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

At the time of the study, I selected the first 12 respondents to participate. Their selection was based on the following criteria: they had successfully graduated from high school, had reached the age of 18, had initiated interest in participating, and had confirmed their availability for interviews. As a protective measure, I ensured the graduates did not feel pressured to participate due to my position at their previous high school.

For my planned research design, I created a brief survey (see Appendix A) to solicit interested participants. The survey was accessible through a QR code on a recruitment flyer, which invited graduates to participate. Potential participants were able to scan a QR code and complete a Google Form to verify their name, age, and graduate status; provide their email address and phone number; and select days and times for interview availability. I confirmed that the graduates met the participation criteria by reviewing data collected via the Google Form. As potential participants completed the form, I sent an email using my Walden email account, inviting them to participate in the study. The email included a description of the study, an explanation of voluntary participation, and information regarding their right to refuse participation without consequence. The email ended by explaining the steps that would follow and inviting students to respond to the email with questions or concerns. Selecting the first 12 respondents introduced an element of random sampling in the way participants were selected. The first 12 graduates who completed the Google Form and demonstrated interest and availability were chosen as the study's participants. No respondents were unable or unwilling to participate, and I closed the form after receiving 12 respondents.

Qualitative researchers typically use small sample sizes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Ravitch and Carl (2021) affirmed that there are no stringent rules for sample size in qualitative research, partly because qualitative research focuses on in-depth insight rather than on generalizing results as in quantitative research. The relationship between sample size and saturation, or the point at which a researcher is no longer gleaning new data from participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), can be complicated in qualitative research depending

on the study's goals, sample criteria, application of existing theory, quality of communication, and approach to analysis (Malterud et al., 2016). I am confident in the study's clear objectives, the specificity of the participants, and the conceptual framework, including theory and pedagogy. I estimated that, if I interviewed 12 graduates using high-quality, open-ended questions, I would reach data saturation. This estimate is supported by Guest et al. (2006), who analyzed 60 interviews and found that qualitative researchers using purposeful sampling were able to reach data saturation in 12 interviews.

Hennink et al. (2017) conducted research to establish the number of interviews required to reach saturation in a qualitative study. They found that half of the codes derived from the data were from the first interview, and code saturation (the point at which no new codes are found) was accomplished after nine interviews (Hennink et al., 2017). These findings echoed the work of Guest et al. (2006), who stated that most themes emerged by the sixth interview, with data saturation occurring between seven and 12 interviews. Hennink et al. (2017) notably added that there is a difference between code saturation and meaning saturation, which may not occur until after 16–24 interviews due to the difference in the researcher having all the necessary data versus understanding the meaning of the data. Bearing this in mind, I planned to recruit additional participants if I felt there was a need for additional interviews beyond 12 to reach meaning saturation.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collection instrument was a researcher-produced semistructured interview protocol that included both closed-ended and open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Because no existing instruments fully addressed the key topics and

framework, I developed unique interview questions aligned to the study and research question. Primary and potential follow-up questions were developed; however, the semistructured interview process allowed me to adapt follow-up questions to gather data that was most pertinent in addressing the problem and purpose of this study (Lambert, 2012). The interview protocol began with introductions, reviewing the purpose of the study, providing consent forms, and reminding participants they could exit the process at any time without consequence. The first two questions allowed me to build rapport with the participants, helping them feel comfortable with the interview and enabling them to answer honestly and fully. Open-ended questions helped elicit rich responses and reduced researcher bias (Lambert, 2012). The final question invited participants to offer valuable suggestions to the field of education. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Zoom audio. This supported cross-checking, ensured reliability, and was used for open coding with thematic analysis.

The interview questions were researcher-produced and written to facilitate semistructured interviews, which guided data collection as the primary instrument. The questions were designed from the literature review and conceptual framework to align with the study's purpose and research question. Table 1 is a crosswalk that shows the alignment between each question and either the literature review or the conceptual framework. Nine questions are grounded in the key concepts identified in the literature review: student-teacher relationships, engagement, and teacher empathy. Five questions align with the theory and pedagogy of the conceptual framework: two questions align with Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory, and three questions align with

Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy. Also, two questions served as introductory questions, and one question concluded the interview by asking participants to share anything else they felt was important.

**Table 1***Crosswalk of Interview Questions*

Interview question	Rationale
1. Tell me about yourself. What do you enjoy doing?	Introduction/Rapport
2. Tell me about your school journey so far. What have you enjoyed the most along the way? What has been the most challenging?	Introduction/Rapport
3. Think about a teacher with whom you felt connected. When did you have this teacher and what was it like to be in their classroom?	LR: Relationships
4. What is a good student–teacher relationship?	LR: Relationships
5. Describe specific things teachers have done or said that impacted your relationship with them.	LR: Relationships
6. In your opinion, is it important for teachers to understand how students are feeling?	CF: Emotional Intelligence
7. Can you tell me about a time when a teacher seemed to understand how you were feeling? How did the teacher respond to how you were feeling?	CF: Emotional Intelligence
8. What does an engaging classroom look and sound like?	LR: Engagement
9. What does an engaging teacher look and sound like?	LR: Engagement
10. Think about times when you have been the most engaged in learning. How did teachers motivate you to be highly engaged in classes?	LR: Engagement
11. Think of a teacher who could be described as warm, someone who made you feel supported. What did they do or say to make you feel like they cared?	CF: Warm Demanders
12. Think of a teacher who could be described as demanding, someone who expected a lot from you. What did they do or say to express their high expectations?	CF: Warm Demanders
13. Can you think of a teacher who could be described as both warm and demanding? How did that teacher earn your respect or effort?	CF: Warm Demanders
14. Try to recall a time when you felt misunderstood by a teacher. What did they do or say to make you feel misunderstood?	LR: Teacher Empathy
15. Try to recall a time when you felt understood by a teacher. What did they do or say to make you feel understood?	LR: Teacher Empathy
16. What are some things teachers can do to better understand and respond to their students?	LR: Teacher Empathy
17. I have one final question for you. Since teachers and others may read this study to better understand students' perspectives, would you like to share anything else that you think is important for them to know and understand?	Conclusion/Final Thoughts

*Note.* CF = Conceptual Framework; LR = Literature Review.

Using open-ended questions encouraged the participants to provide detailed responses and strengthened the likelihood that I would collect the data necessary to address the research question sufficiently and confidently after completing 12 interviews. As shown in Table 1, the interview questions were guided by the three key concepts that emerged from the literature review related to the practice of teacher empathy: teacher–student relationships (three questions), approaches to engage learners (three questions), and empathy in teaching (three questions) along with the conceptual framework including Goleman’s (1995) emotional intelligence theory (two questions) and Kleinfeld’s (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy (three questions). These aligned interview questions were designed to elicit the perspectives of recent high school graduates on how past teachers established relationships, understood emotions, created engaging classrooms, acted as warm demanders, and responded with empathy. Follow-up questions prompted participants to share specific strategies and recommendations.

To ensure that the semistructured interview questions established content validity and were sufficient to answer the research question, I selected two administrators to assist me in vetting the data collection instrument. These leaders both had experience working with high school students and teachers. I reviewed the purpose of the research study, explained the research question that needed to be answered, and requested that the administrators review the interview questions to ensure that they were valid, sufficient to answer the research question, appropriate for the participants, clearly stated, and relevant. The administrators checked for alignment with the study’s purpose and research question. The administrators also checked for technical and other considerations, including

wording, sequence, assumptions, and leading language (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The administrators did not recommend modifications to questions.

The interview protocol and final set of questions included possible follow-up questions to support collecting data that would be sufficient to answer the research question. Once the questions were finalized, I engaged in the interview process personally. Ravitch and Carl (2021) advised that experiencing the interview process can create reflective insight and a better sense of the vulnerability an interviewee may feel. I audio-recorded the interview and listened to it later as a precautionary measure to ensure the questions were appropriate and to account for the safety of the participants. This opportunity to engage in the interview process enabled me to ensure that the data collection instrument and interview questions were sufficient to answer the research question.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data**

My first step was to receive approval from Walden University's IRB, which I received on June 13, 2025 (Approval No. 06-13-25-1155012). My next step was to review the plans for my study with the building principal of the high school. My Walden University student email address was used for correspondence related to the study. I met with the principal and reviewed my research study's purpose and methodology. The principal approved my request to recruit recent graduates to participate in the study.

Next, I emailed the principal and requested that he post the flyer on the school's social media pages. The email presented the purpose of the study and a Google Form, which would be used to survey potential participants (see Appendix A). The survey asked

recent high school graduates to share their availability for scheduling an interview. I reviewed each of the graduates' responses and selected the first 12 respondents who expressed interest and showed availability. I emailed the respondents the consent form and verified an interview time.

I contacted each participant through email. In the email, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the research study, and discussed the positive implications of the graduate's potential participation. I included information regarding consent, my contact information, and presented a timeline with expectations for the study. I explained consent fully, clarifying that graduates had the right to determine their participation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Consent forms were made available to each graduate by providing digital versions attached to the email as well as hard copies, which were completed on-site before the interview began. If needed, I planned to return to the recruitment pool and contact additional interested individuals; however, this was not necessary.

For the participants who were selected for the study, I emailed them to notify them that they had been selected as one of the 12 participants for the study. I provided detailed information, including the location of the interview, the face-to-face setting, the expectation that the interview would be recorded and last between 45 and 60 minutes, and the fact that participants would not be receiving a monetary gift for their participation. I asked each participant to review a table and to select a location and possible dates and times that would be convenient for their interview. All interviews were conducted in person at a public, neutral location and followed a semistructured format. After conducting the first interview, I received committee approval before proceeding

with the remaining 11 interviews. I completed the remaining interviews within 2 weeks, conducting 5 interviews the first week and 6 interviews the following week. One week before each interview, I emailed the interview questions to each participant. This step helped ensure they felt safe, knew what to expect, and had an opportunity to preview the questions to determine their comfort level with proceeding.

To collect the data, I interviewed each participant in person at a location of their preference, offering participants the option of a coffee shop or a local public library. To ensure confidentiality and the ability to audio record the interview, the coffee shops offered were only those with meeting rooms; all public libraries have public meeting rooms. As I met with each participant, I provided a briefing to ensure the participants felt informed and comfortable. This process began with verbal reassurance that the study would not identify them or anyone they might discuss, and that they could cease participation in the interview at any time. Rubin and Rubin (2012) described the interview as a conversational partnership that demands the researcher to be ethical in honoring their promises, showing respect, and doing no harm. I encouraged the recent graduates to feel safe telling stories about their experiences, reminding them of the purpose of the study and that the information could benefit other students, teachers, and schools in the future. I explained how the interview would proceed: I would take notes and record the interview using Zoom audio so it could be transcribed later. I also provided each participant with a hard copy of the interview questions for their reference.

To ensure a high level of trustworthiness in the data, after each interview, I reviewed a summary of my transcript and asked the participants if they felt like anything

needed to be changed. After concluding the interviews, I reviewed the participants' contact information, thanked them for completing the process, and reminded them that they would receive a summary of my findings upon completion of the study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

My plan for data analysis began with the data collected from 12 transcribed interviews recorded using Zoom audio. Before coding began, I cleaned and organized the raw data using Microsoft Word and Excel. First, I read each transcript and removed unnecessary words or phrases, such as a student saying the word *like* repeatedly as a filler word. I also took care to remove any identifiable information to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. After cleaning the transcripts and becoming familiar with the content, I organized the data. The interview questions were cross walked with key concepts from the literature review and the conceptual framework. I used the existing organizational structure to begin sorting data in a spreadsheet.

I approached data analysis using inductive coding processes through which the codes came directly from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As I read through the transcribed interviews, I began the coding process by highlighting portions of data, summarizing sections of the text, and looking for recurring words and phrases, a process which has been referred to as first level or open coding (Miles et al., 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This first round of coding enabled me to identify salient features, followed by a second round during which I focused on my research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My primary goal during this analytical portion of the study was to find a logical path from the raw data provided by the participants to clear answers to my research

question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used hand coding to assign codes to portions of the transcripts using words and phrases. Coding is an iterative process that allowed me to search the data looking for repetition, strong language, agreement/disagreement among participants, and gaps (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

I used thematic analysis to identify and analyze relationships in the coded data; this process led to the discovery of relevant concepts, themes, and examples that were central to answering the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I continued to refine codes and document my thought process through memos (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After completing the initial coding process, I used connecting and categorizing strategies to further analyze the data by finding both similarities and differences among codes (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I identified and analyzed the relationships between codes. This process allowed me to group codes into broader categories. I utilized a spreadsheet to organize codes into categories. I created a memo to organize my thoughts regarding how codes relate to each other categorically (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I reviewed the categories that emerged from the data and assessed their continued alignment with answering the research question. The resulting categories led to the meaningful organization of data and enabled me to identify deeper concepts.

From the categories, I analyzed the data to find overarching concepts and develop themes. Part of this process included identifying patterns, overlapping ideas, and disconnections (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As potential themes emerged, I documented them and reflected on my interpretations while remaining open to possible misinterpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After developing themes, I again reviewed the entire dataset to

ensure that the emerging themes accurately represented the data and to determine whether any portions required recoding (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I continued to utilize a spreadsheet to organize codes, categories, and themes. I documented each theme and its meaning, referencing the raw data to analyze the data. Throughout this process, I wrote memos to ensure proper interpretation.

### ***Discrepant Cases***

I planned to respond to discrepant cases with an open mind and consider alternative explanations for the data (Moffatt et al., 2006). Moffatt et al. (2006) described discrepant cases as those that did not follow the pattern that the researcher expected. I was cognizant of divergent responses during the interviews and sought to clarify the participant's thinking using probing follow-up questions. As I analyzed the data, I watched for discrepant cases that did not fit the codes, categories, or themes used for the other data. Potential discrepant cases led me to revisit the transcript, consider the experiences that the participant shared, and analyze the data from that perspective. Any discrepant cases discovered from the data would be shared in the findings of the study.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, which reflects the rigor and quality of a qualitative study, describes the actions the researcher takes to guarantee that the study accurately represents the truth of the participants' lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This representation is the hallmark of qualitative research through which researchers share the perspectives of participants and seek to answer the research question from a constructivist approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although naturalistic inquiry is the foundation of

qualitative research, researchers can still ensure the trustworthiness and validity of their studies by applying criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

For this study, I collected data by interviewing participants, authentically representing their perspectives, and taking careful steps to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Credibility was ensured by using methods aligned to my research question, analyzing the data carefully, and employing validity strategies like reflexivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability was accomplished by acknowledging the applicability of these data to more generalized settings by presenting detailed information and descriptions that were relevant to the secondary school context of the participants but could be used for comparison to other contexts (Guba, 1981; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Dependability was established by vetting the research design with multiple advisers and designing the study to seek rigor and data consistency (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Confirmability was secured through reflexivity. These will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

### **Credibility**

One of the foundational assurances a researcher must address to achieve trustworthiness is the credibility of the study. Credibility, or the internal validity of a study, begins with research methods that are appropriately aligned to collect the data necessary to answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this qualitative study, my participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis are all aligned to the purpose of the study and the research question.

To ensure credibility, I used reflexivity as a validity strategy throughout data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The practice of reflexivity made me accountable for staying neutral by reflecting on the data collected and on its representation of the participants' experiences as I worked to answer the research question. I achieved credibility in the study by producing data findings that represented the perspectives and experiences of the participants within the context of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Seeking to understand and authentically represent the participants' perspectives required time. I chose to conduct face-to-face, semistructured interviews to allow me the time and space to become familiar with the participants and to structure follow-up questions according to their responses.

Ravitch and Carl (2021) explained that credibility is established by explaining patterns based on complexities. Credibility, then, is achieved when a researcher engages in a recursive design that seeks complexity through the methodology and the resulting data. One technique that I used to seek complexity while ensuring credibility was conducting member checks. After each interview, I asked the participant to review my summary of their responses. The participants were asked for additional feedback to verify the accuracy of the data.

The final technique that I used to achieve credibility is data saturation. In a qualitative study, data saturation can be problematic because it implies that the researcher has found a certain reality; however, data saturation simply means that the researcher is no longer discovering new themes in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Data saturation should generally occur in a study after interviewing 12 participants, as evidenced by the

recurring patterns and data sufficient to answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Transferability**

The goal of qualitative research is not generalizability; rather, it is to offer detailed descriptions of the phenomenon using context-rich language (Guba, 1981). Although generalizability was not the goal of this study, the findings are transferable to other populations and contexts. Transferability is considered an important criterion to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. Transferability has been likened to the external validity of quantitative research because it concerns the extent to which readers can apply the researcher's findings to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Transferability was accomplished through the study's design and thick description.

By using purposeful sampling and open-ended interview questions, I was able to select participants who could provide valuable information to answer the research question. The participants responded to the open-ended and follow-up questions with detailed information regarding their perspectives and experiences with the phenomenon in a school context. After analyzing the transcripts, I carefully included thick description, which Ravitch and Carl (2021) described as a detailed description of both the data and the context, into the study. Thick description leads to thick interpretation and satisfies a researcher's goal of deeply understanding the meanings that participants have for elements within their context or culture (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For readers of my study, thick description enables them to compare my design and findings with those in other

contexts and to transfer applicable elements to other settings and groups (Guba, 1981; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of a qualitative study's data and can be compared to reliability within quantitative research (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because qualitative research will always be unique to the participants' lived experiences, dependability does not mean that the study could be replicated exactly if another researcher sought to carry it out again. However, the criterion for dependability is primarily focused on how consistently the findings align with the data. For this study, I carefully selected the research methods to collect the data necessary to answer the research question and to produce findings consistent with the data. Dependability was established by vetting the research design with multiple advisers and designing the study to seek rigor and data consistency (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability, which is similar to the quantitative idea of objectivity, is secured through reflexivity. Qualitative researchers do not seek objectivity because they know it is unattainable (Guba, 1981); rather, recognizing that there will always be an element of subjectivity in human behavior, they focus on the confirmability of the data.

Confirmability is a measure of trustworthiness that guards against the subjectivity of the researcher as the primary instrument by protecting the integrity of the data and ensuring that it is genuinely representative of the participants' perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Knowing that I brought my own experiences and biases, I engaged in the practice

of reflexivity to ensure my positionality did not affect data analysis or interpretation. Researchers conducting interviews should engage in strategies such as reflexivity to determine whether their conclusions are accurate and consistent (Burkholder et al., 2020). In addition to reflexivity, I also ensured a clear audit trail to achieve confirmability. Data collection was systematic and rigorous, so readers of the study can verify the results. I also reflected in a journal during the research process to support reflexivity and the audit trail.

### **Ethical Procedures**

My desire to elevate students' perspectives through interviews with recent high school graduates led me to consider and honor ethical procedures from the inception of this study. I gained approval from Walden's IRB on June 13, 2025. Ethical safeguards were in place during the participant selection process. I only recruited participants who had reached the age of 18 and could give legal consent to participate. I did not recruit participants from the class over which I had disciplinary supervision. My first step in following ethical procedures was to obtain participant consent. Although parents and guardians of the participants did not need to sign consent forms, I ensured that the study followed the highest ethics guidelines and clearly communicated expectations for the study: participation is completely voluntary, participants' identities and responses would be kept confidential, participants could cease participation at any time without consequence, and participants could choose not to answer an interview question. Before conducting each interview, I reviewed the participant's rights again and asked whether they had any questions or concerns. I ensured confidentiality throughout the interview

process by replacing participants' names with codes and only storing data on password-protected devices. The data gathered for this study will be kept for five years and then destroyed. After completing each interview, I reviewed my summary of the participant's responses to verify that the data accurately reflected their perspective. Participants were able to adjust the data before I began data analysis. When the study is completed, the participants will be sent a written summary of the research findings. I will also present the findings to the district superintendent.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. In Chapter 3, I explained my rationale for choosing a qualitative research design, discussed my role as the researcher, outlined the methodology used in this study, and presented the methods used to ensure trustworthiness. Qualitative research equipped me to collect data that supported the exploration of students' perspectives on the phenomenon. My role as a qualitative researcher was described, along with the steps I would take to protect participants and mitigate possible power imbalances. I employed purposeful sampling to ensure the collected data could be used to gain insight into graduates' perspectives on the practice of the phenomenon. I described the instrumentation used, along with the procedures for data collection and analysis. I analyzed data from 12 semistructured interviews and interpreted the findings, focusing on a thick description of the data and the context. I took cautionary measures to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the

study. I followed ethical procedures to ensure the protective treatment of the participants and data.

I present the findings in Chapter 4. I will describe the setting and the participants' demographics. I will also explain how the data were collected and discuss variations and unusual circumstances that occurred during collection. I will present evidence of the study's trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, I will discuss the study's results by addressing the research question and presenting data to support my findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

Recent high school graduates' perspectives on the practice of teacher empathy have been minimally represented in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state. The research question that guided the study was, "What are recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state?" The research question enabled me to focus on the perspectives of recent high school graduates, those who had recently been students in the public school system and had firsthand experiences with the practice of teacher empathy and how it influenced their engagement as learners. Interviews were conducted with 12 recent high school graduates and provided meaningful data to represent their perspectives and offer insight into the practice of teacher empathy.

In Chapter 4, the results of this study are presented in five sections. In the first section, I describe the setting, noting the characteristics of the participants that were pertinent to the study. In the second section, which is devoted to data collection, I discuss the number of participants, how data were collected and recorded, and the circumstances encountered during the data collection process. In the third section, I detail the results of the data analysis, including a narrative for the codes, categories, and themes that were developed from the data. Next, I present the study's results in the fourth section, including a discussion of the findings through the lens of the research question. In the last section on trustworthiness, I address evidence of the strategies related to the study's

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the results of this basic qualitative study. I present the study's key findings and describe the implications for readers, stakeholders, and future researchers. The results from data analysis highlighted the perspectives of recent high school graduates on how teachers practiced empathy to engage learners. The chapter ends with a preview of Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

The contextual conditions for the study's setting include that interviews were conducted during the summer, several weeks after graduation. This interval between graduation and the interviews provided participants with some reflective distance from their high school experience. This gap helped encourage candid responses by reducing the likelihood of social pressure associated with my position at the participants' former high school. This effort to capture data that truly reflected the participants' subjective realities (Ravitch & Carl, 2021) facilitated my analysis of the participants' feelings as authentically representative of their experiences with the phenomenon of teacher empathy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The research for this study was conducted in public libraries, coffee shops, and community centers. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in private meeting rooms within public venues. Private meeting rooms ensured the confidentiality of the participants, minimized distractions, maximized comfort, and promoted honest feedback on the interview questions.

The demographics of the participants in the study were recent high school graduates who had reached the age of 18 and had experience learning in a public high

school setting in an urban school district in a Southern state. Participants' demographics were not collected as part of this study.

### **Data Collection**

There were 12 participants in this study. As planned in my recruitment strategy, I used purposeful sampling and selected 12 participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. The first 12 respondents had all graduated from high school, reached the age of 18, expressed their interest in participating, and were available to be interviewed. Therefore, the first 12 respondents were able to participate. The data for the study were derived solely from semistructured interviews conducted with the participants. Data collection methods for this study adhered to the procedures discussed in Chapter 3 and the ethical requirements outlined by Walden University's IRB.

As planned in the research design, potential participants were recruited through flyers posted to the school's social media accounts. Potential participants were asked to respond to a brief survey (see Appendix A) to express their interest. Because the first 12 respondents met the recruitment criteria, the study was able to maintain an element of random sampling. The survey collected contact information and email addresses from potential participants, who were invited to participate in the study via email from my Walden email account. The email described the study, explained that participation was completely voluntary, provided the questions that would be asked in the interview, and included the consent form.

Once the interview date and time had been scheduled, I reserved a meeting room for each of the participants at their selected meeting place. Interview locations varied,

including the public library, coffee shops, and a community center. Data were collected through a single interview session with each participant; no follow-up interviews were necessary. The first interview was conducted in June 2025. After receiving committee approval to proceed, the 11 remaining interviews were conducted in July 2025 within a 2-week timeframe. At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to review a hard copy of the consent form, ask any questions they had, and sign the consent form if they wished to proceed with the interview. All 12 recent high school graduates chose to participate. The interviews ranged from 25 to 52 minutes, with most lasting approximately 39 minutes. Private meeting rooms enabled data to be recorded and transcribed using Zoom audio. Within 24 hours of each interview, I reviewed the transcript while listening to the recorded audio and corrected any mistakes the software made in recording the data. The transcripts of the participants' responses were the sole data collection instrument used for analysis. No unusual circumstances arose during the data collection process, which proceeded without incident and adhered to the plan described in Chapter 3.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis was conducted as planned in Chapter 3. I used thematic analysis to progress from initial codes to final themes, finding relationships in the data that were key to answering the research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Before beginning the coding process, I read through each of the 12 transcribed interviews. I cleaned and organized the raw data. The process of cleaning the data included removing filler words to clarify the meaning of each participant's responses, removing identifiable

information, and creating a general familiarity with the content of each transcription. No alterations to meaning were made, and all participants' intent was preserved. Because the interview questions were already cross walked with key concepts from the literature review and the conceptual framework, I began the process of organizing the data using the existing foundation and inductive coding processes, deriving the codes directly from the data sources (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The process of moving inductively from codes to categories to themes began with an initial round of open coding (Miles et al., 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used hand coding, assigning words and phrases as codes to quotations and sections of the transcripts. I kept the data organized through Microsoft Excel, which allowed me to filter the data based on codes or interview questions. The initial coding was followed by a second round that was more focused on the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I compared the data sources, looking for strong word choices from individual participants and agreement or disagreement between multiple participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The thematic analysis process enabled me to organize codes into categories and to connect categories under themes, identifying patterns in the data while deeply exploring the perspectives of recent high school graduates. As I progressed through the analysis, I practiced reflexivity, reflecting on my interpretations and remaining open to alternative possibilities (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). On occasion, I revisited the raw data to ensure that my interpretations accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences. Eventually, five themes emerged that authentically captured the entire data set (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

## Codes

After reading each transcript for familiarity and completing the first round of open coding, I organized the codes in a spreadsheet. I began with six columns, which identified the following: interview number (1–12), question number (1–17), corresponding key concept from the literature review or the conceptual framework (Table 1), code number (1–72), descriptive code (word or phrase), and an excerpt from the transcript. Each occurrence of a code was aligned to a quote from the transcript. Everything was coded by hand; I did not use the assistance of software to automate the coding process. At the end of the coding process, 72 codes had been identified. Most of the codes had emerged by the sixth interview, with minimal new coding resulting from interviews seven through nine. No new codes were needed for coding Interviews 10, 11, and 12.

Table 2 presents a sample from the spreadsheet to illustrate how the first participant's responses were coded. The first column lists five codes derived from the interview. The number preceding each code indicates the order in which codes were assigned. The second column highlights excerpts from the transcript to demonstrate how each code was derived from the participant's own words. This raw data presents a sample of the connections made between the raw data and emerging codes and offers context for my analysis. Some codes use the participant's words directly, while others summarize the essence of the participant's response. These five samples illustrate the progression from raw data to meaningful codes during the first round of open coding.

**Table 2***Sample Coding*

Code	Raw data
7 – Life lessons beyond academics	<i>In a good student–teacher relationship, as a student, you want to take the class and learn something, but you also want to learn life lessons through the class.</i>
13 – Privacy matters	<i>I don't want teachers to check on me in front of the whole class.</i>
14 – Sharing perspective or advice	<i>I think it would change the dynamics a lot, because you're hearing it from our perspective. This is our perspective. Just as much as we probably would want to hear your perspective. But I think it would start changing if we would listen to both perspectives.</i>
16 – Connection as classroom practice	<i>Before going into the classroom, start with that connection at the door, it already made you engaged for that class that day.</i>
41 – Belief in students	<i>They know that you are capable of more.</i>

Table 3 presents the complete set of 72 codes used to represent the data. The codes are listed in the order in which they were generated during the coding process. Each code is accompanied by supporting raw data, including an excerpt from one of the participants' interviews, to substantiate the unique nature of each code. This listing represents the collective range of the data after the coding process and shows connections between the participants' words and the codes that informed the analysis. Whereas some codes capture the participants' exact language, other codes convey synthesized representations of the participants' responses.

**Table 3***Codes With Supporting Raw Data*

Code	Raw data
1 – Welcoming classroom environment	<i>Her classroom is always an open place, and I think that's what made me so connected.</i>
2 – Feelings of safety and trust	<i>A classroom should be somewhere where you should feel safe enough to go in there to learn stuff.</i>
3 – Care and help	<i>It motivated me, because I knew she was still trying to help me.</i>
4 – Perceived conditional care	<i>With AP teachers, they're more likely to care, because they know you're willing to take that extra step.</i>
5 – Healthy boundaries	<i>It should be understood between teachers and students that.... We're here to learn, and they're here to teach us.</i>
6 – Feeling known/understood	<i>Having your teacher know you well to know if you're down, or if something good has happened in your life.</i>
7 – Life lessons beyond academics	<i>Teach me a life lesson, because you don't want to just walk out of high school being an academic robot who knows all the algebra and everything. You want to be a good human.</i>
8 – Teacher impact	<i>He was there for me, and how big of an impact he actually had, being one of the reasons why I've grown so much throughout my high school years.</i>
9 – Check in	<i>I was close with him, and he would always check on me if I had a bad day.</i>
10 – Affirmation and praise	<i>He told me how proud he was of me, because he'd even seen the growth in myself before I even saw it.</i>
11 – Relationship drives motivation to learn	<i>She just wants to know what's going on in your life, and that makes you want to learn.</i>
12 – Classroom conversation	<i>It (conversation in the classroom) makes you more open in a learning environment, because now you know the type of person she is, and it makes you want to engage.</i>
13 – Privacy matters	<i>Kids know that when a student gets put out in the hallway, it's probably not good, or something is happening; so, when I talk about surroundings and reading the room, find that one-on-one time.</i>
14 – Sharing perspective or advice	<i>She also was able to give me a mother's perspective, which I felt like helped.</i>
15 – Sharing experience	<i>He wrote me a letter saying that he understands, went through the same problem or struggle when he was in high school, and how he got through it.</i>
16 – Connection as classroom practice	<i>He would do an interview every single day for about 5 minutes. He just learns about the students, and he wants to know what you're thinking.</i>
17 – Asking questions and listening	<i>He would call on students, asking them to share their opinion, or for input.</i>
18 – Active teaching	<i>She was actively talking to multiple students throughout the classroom.</i>

Code	Raw data
19 – Group work	<i>Group activities, or when they open it up to group discussions, I think that really gets the class going and talking.</i>
20 – Support	<i>He reassured me that I have support through him and the people surrounding me, even if I didn't feel it in other places.</i>
21 – Demanding	<i>I didn't really want to be in the class anymore because of how demanding they were.</i>
22 – Warm and demanding	<i>He wants to know how you're doing - what your brain's like, how you are as a person, but he also expects a lot from you. It's a good chemistry.</i>
23 – Learning disabilities	<i>With my ADHD, I feel like that's where I felt the most misunderstood.</i>
24 – Empathy boosts engagement and respect	<i>Having those teachers has built a strong relationship of respect, so I'm gonna work hard for them.</i>
25 – Empathy boosts self-efficacy	<i>Knowing that you do have this - you can achieve passing this AP test.</i>
26 – Discipline	<i>If you see your students in the wrong, there's a loving way to do it, and not in a hurtful way.</i>
27 – Love and diversity	<i>Especially, public schools, you're having so many kids come from different backgrounds...And I want teachers to be loving, but at the same time I want them to be understanding.</i>
28 – PLC, best practices	<i>This one really great teacher did this. Let's all take from that and then figure out what works for all of us. So that way, all of your 7 or 8 period classroom teachers are all great teachers.</i>
29 – Understanding	<i>If the teacher understands what the student goes through, how they're feeling, it can help them better understand why they're struggling to turn in their work; or if something's going on in their home, it helps them better understand why we may not be performing at the best level.</i>
30 – Fun	<i>She wants to be there. She knows that even though we don't necessarily want to be there, she's still gonna show up and try her best to have a fun learning environment.</i>
31 – Interaction and debate	<i>[An engaging classroom is] lots of students participating and speaking and contributing to what we're learning.</i>
32 – Approachable in class	<i>Classrooms are the most engaging when teachers are more approachable.</i>
33 – Attendance and motivation	<i>I always felt more motivated in her class, because I had a teacher-student bond with her, so I wanted to do my best in that class.</i>
34 – feeling unwanted/unliked	<i>The classes that I didn't enjoy, that was also because I didn't feel like I needed to be in the class, or that the teacher really wanted me in there.</i>
35 – Teacher-centered	<i>An engaging classroom is definitely a classroom where you're not all just sitting there, and taking notes or just listen to the teacher lecture.</i>
36 – Physical movement strategies	<i>Have students get up and talk to other classmates around the room.</i>

Code	Raw data
37 – Differentiation	<i>Not all students are the same. Everyone's learning technique is different, everyone's everything is different. So you have to approach everything in a different way. If you gotta change up how you teach your lecture for one class, then do it.</i>
38 – Storytelling in class	<i>He would sit down with us, and it would be like we're having a conversation one-on-one, because he would incorporate stories. And it kind of went with history. And he also asked us about stories that we had that were kind of related to history.</i>
39 – Strict	<i>[To be engaging, teachers should be] strict, but not too strict, where it's, like, pushing you away from the subject.</i>
40 – Flexibility	<i>She was like, oh, if you need a day or two, that's perfectly fine. That kind of dynamic where the teacher is flexible with their schedule for you - it definitely impacts the student a lot.</i>
41 – Belief in students	<i>Having them have faith in you makes you work harder and feel more confident in the work you're doing.</i>
42 – Performance	<i>[Her understanding] helped me get a better grade and just feel more confident in my abilities.</i>
43 – Feeling misunderstood	<i>[Feeling misunderstood] made me not want to try my best in the class, because he wasn't listening or understanding that I just needed a few more days on my assignment, and I would turn it in. I would even take half credit for it, but it made me not want to try my best, because he didn't seem to care.</i>
44 – Always learning	<i>When he demanded things out of you, he would raise his voice, not in a mean way, but he'd raise his voice, like guys, we have to learn.</i>
45 – Outgoing	<i>[I felt connected because of] Her kindness, the way she acted fun, so nice, and I believe she went out of her way to get to know everyone.</i>
46 – Respect	<i>It made me want to treat her with the same respect she's been giving me.</i>
47 – Emotional energy/capacity	<i>It takes a lot of emotion to learn at school.</i>
48 – incentives	<i>She did a lot of incentives... I remember she gave out lots of treats, and that just reminds me of my elementary school days.</i>
49 – Visuals	<i>[Engaged by] visuals... I remember teachers who had slides... So that's the first thing I see when I walk in.</i>
50 – Individual help	<i>He clearly saw that I was struggling and would always help. He'd come to my table to give me extra help.</i>
51 – High expectations (with support)	<i>He expected a lot out of me, because he knew I was capable of it.</i>
52 – Assessment (reassuring/flexible)	<i>I messed up and he was like, it's okay, you can redo it. He just wanted me to do my best, and I appreciated it.</i>
53 – Loves teaching	<i>She loves her job.</i>
54 – Great/favorite teacher	<i>Out of all my years of school, she's one of the best teachers that I've ever had.</i>

Code	Raw data
55 – Liked/loved	<i>She liked me, though, so I liked her, because she cared.</i>
56 – Time/connection outside of class	<i>When they wave a hand in the hallway, or they stop you in the hallway and talk to you - I think that really helps, and it makes you feel more cared for. It helps in the classroom, too.</i>
57 – Positive voice or smile	<i>[Students are engaged] when they have a really upbeat voice.</i>
58 – Cold/bad attitude	<i>I felt like he was pretty demanding, and he just appeared to have a cold demeanor.</i>
59 – Boring	<i>If there's a silent classroom, and they're just given homework, the kid's gonna get bored.</i>
60 – Classroom management	<i>She knew what to do to make the class sit down and listen, and just be engaging and stuff.</i>
61 – Music playing	<i>She'd put on music while we were working, so that kind of got me in the groove of listening to music when I started to work.</i>
62 – Felt like family/friend	<i>She was more like a grandma to me, to be honest.</i>
63 – Space to regulate	<i>But if they're acting out and not making great decisions, that would be a time to step in as a teacher. Send them out and let them have their own little alone time.</i>
64 – Difficult, lack of support	<i>I would ask him for help, too. But he would be like, just ask your classmates, which was difficult, because they were also struggling.</i>
65 – Direct instruction	<i>She would be pretty straight up about the things she taught. She makes it make sense, and that pieces together in your brain. And it stays up there. And that's how she teaches.</i>
66 – Fair treatment	<i>He offered extra credit to students only who are there on that testing day. I had a doctor's appointment, so I didn't get a chance to do that extra credit. That made me lose a little bit of respect for him, because he wasn't as understanding as I thought he would be.</i>
67 – Role model	<i>I have a few pretty good teacher-student relationships. All my high school years I've grown up having [them] as a role model.</i>
68 – Positive attitude	<i>She was such a positive teacher.</i>
69 – Projects and activities	<i>Every time I knew we'd be doing an activity or a project, I'd be looking forward to it.</i>
70 – Choice	<i>Let the students have a say in what we do.</i>
71 – Specific feedback	<i>Teachers giving you feedback on your work, instead of just a letter grade, can help a student understand what they're doing wrong, and what they can improve on.</i>
72 – Change	<i>Whenever teachers switch up seats constantly, it keeps you on your toes.</i>

## Categories

Data analysis continued by clustering the codes into categories based on similarities. I began this process by using the spreadsheet to determine how many times a code was found in the data. I sorted the spreadsheet to highlight the most frequently occurring codes. This enabled me to see which codes were the most discussed by participants. The codes that were most prevalent in the data were also well represented among most, if not all, of the participants. The following were the most prevalent codes along with how many participants contributed data under that code: *Care and Help* (all 12 participants), *Feeling Known/Understood* (all 12 participants), *Relationship Drives Motivation to Learn* (11/12 participants), *Asking Questions and Listening* (11/12 participants), *Connection as Classroom Practice* (10/12 participants), and *Check In* (9/12 participants). Identifying these leading codes was a helpful step in transitioning from codes to broader categories.

After identifying which codes were used most frequently, I analyzed their meanings and examined how the most prevalent codes were related to one another. I compared and contrasted the leading codes, clarified their meanings from the participants' perspectives, and revisited the transcripts as needed. Throughout this process, I considered which shared ideas and experiences emerged across the participants' responses. I often reflected to determine whether some codes captured similar concepts or reflected more distinct experiences. These iterations led me to revisit the transcripts and clarify the participants' meanings. This process enabled me to cluster

codes into broader categories representing the participants' perspectives and experiences with the practice of teacher empathy.

There was some overlap in the initial findings, which led me to create four original categories. However, the process of developing categories from codes resulted in the need to revisit and clarify the nuanced meanings of some codes. For example, data coded under *Check In* was later distinguished from data coded as *Connection*, which I further clarified by renaming the code *Connection as Classroom Practice*. The two codes appeared similar, but there were nuanced differences: while participants intended *Check In* to refer to personal encounters with their teachers, they used *Connection* to describe broader classroom experiences. Therefore, *Connection* was renamed *Connection as Classroom Practice* to distinguish between the two concepts more clearly. These codes were then mapped to different categories. The code *Check In* was mapped with several other codes to the category *Compassionate Understanding*, representing what teachers do to demonstrate compassion and understand how their students are feeling. The code *Connection as Classroom Practice*, clustered with several other codes representing the strategies teachers used to connect with students during class, was mapped to the broader category *Classroom Connection*.

In addition to working through these nuanced distinctions, using a standard sentence frame to describe each category (see Table 4) helped me determine the requisite final seven categories. These descriptions confirmed that each code aligned with a broader category that reflected the participants' similar experiences. For example, I could ask whether the code *Sharing Perspective or Advice* fell easily into the category

description for *Compassionate Care* by adding it to the end of the category's description: Recent high school graduates felt like it was important for teachers to find time to understand how students are feeling because it showed compassionate care through sharing perspective or advice. The frequently occurring codes mapped clearly into one of the seven categories. Less prevalent, negative codes were naturally clustered as barriers to engagement. Other remaining, less prevalent codes were readily organized within the established categories, demonstrating that the categories were sufficient to capture the data. As I reviewed the category descriptions and compared them with the raw data, I was confident that the seven final categories effectively represented the participants' perspectives. Table 4 lists the categories with a brief description of each alongside the codes that were clustered together to create the category.

**Table 4***Categories and Codes*

Categories	Description	Codes
Compassionate understanding	Recent high school graduates felt like it was important for teachers to find time to understand how students are feeling because it showed compassionate care.	Check in Healthy boundaries Privacy matters Sharing experience Sharing perspective or advice Space to regulate Time and connection outside of class
Trusting relationships	Recent high school graduates were motivated to learn when they felt connected to their teachers through positive, trusting relationships.	Affirmation and praise Emotional energy/capacity Feelings of safety and trust Felt like family or friend Liked/loved Relationship drives motivation to learn Respect Role model Teacher impact
Teacher enthusiasm	Recent high school graduates felt engaged when they perceived that teachers were genuinely enthusiastic about teaching.	Fun Loves teaching Outgoing Positive attitude Positive voice, smile Welcoming classroom environment
Classroom connection	Recent high school graduates felt engaged by teachers who prioritized connecting with them during class and through instruction.	Approachable in class Classroom conversations Connection as classroom practice Storytelling in class Understanding

Categories	Description	Codes
Supporting excellence	Recent high school graduates were more engaged by empathetic teachers who balanced high expectations for their learning with understanding, care, flexibility, and support.	Always learning Assessment (reassuring/flexible) Attendance and motivation Belief in students Care and help Differentiation Empathy boosts engagement/respect Empathy boosts self-efficacy Feeling known/understood Flexibility High expectations (with support) Individual help Love and diversity Performance Support Warm and demanding
Engaging classrooms	Recent high school graduates felt more engaged in classrooms with engaged teachers who focused on group participation while supporting individual learners and effectively managing the classroom. These teachers were open to ideas, change, discussion/debate, and groupwork.	Active teaching Asking questions & listening Change Choice Classroom management Direct instruction Group work Incentives Interaction and debate Life lessons beyond academics Music playing Physical movement strategies Plc, best practices Projects/activities Specific feedback Visuals
Engagement barriers	Recent high school graduates disengaged from learning when they felt misunderstood by demanding teachers who seemed not to care about their situations, needs, or perspectives.	Boring Cold/bad attitude Demanding Difficult, lack of support Discipline Fair treatment Feeling misunderstood Feeling unwanted/unliked Learning disabilities Perceived conditional care Strict Teacher-centered

## Themes

As I progressed through thematic analysis, I moved from raw data that was organized into codes to describe what the participants had said to categories that represented shared concepts across the codes and finally to themes that interpreted the participants' perspectives and experiences through the lens of the conceptual framework for the purpose of answering the research question. To accomplish this, I reflected on the ideas the categories represented and considered how best to organize the categories into themes that would explain the data meaningfully. I considered the ways the categories may collectively represent broader patterns in the participants' perspectives and experiences while connecting that information back to the conceptual framework and addressing the research question.

After clustering the codes into seven categories, five distinct themes emerged from the data analysis, representing the perspectives of recent high school graduates. Each theme highlights a teacher quality, followed by the practice that evidenced that quality to the participants. Themes are phrased in parallel structure to highlight the connection to the research question on student engagement. This structure enabled the themes to clearly organize categories into interpretive statements that explain what participants experienced that led to their engagement (or disengagement) as learners. The first theme revealed that the participants were more engaged by teachers whom they trusted, felt understood by, and experienced a compassionate response from. The second theme highlighted that recent high school graduates found enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms to be more engaging. The third theme summarized the

many ways in which the participants felt supported by their teachers to succeed in meeting their expectations. The fourth theme emphasized that participants felt most engaged in classrooms characterized by active teachers who welcomed discussion and collaboration. The final theme represented barriers to student engagement, noting that participants felt disengaged by teachers who seemed to lack understanding and care for them as individuals yet demanded much from them as students. Each participant shared perspectives and experiences that supported these five themes and answered the research question.

The first theme revealed that recent high school graduates felt engaged by compassionate teachers who fostered trusting relationships. Developing this theme was the result of seeing patterns in the way that participants felt individually seen, heard, and understood by their teachers. When participants experienced compassionate teachers who worked to understand them and build relationships with them, they reported being engaged as learners. Table 5 presents Theme 1 along with the categories and codes that were grouped under the overarching theme.

**Table 5***Theme 1 With Categories and Codes*

Theme	Categories	Codes
Recent high school graduates felt engaged by compassionate teachers who fostered trusting relationships.	Compassionate understanding	Check in Healthy boundaries Privacy matters Sharing experience Sharing perspective or advice Space to regulate Time and connection outside of class
	Trusting relationships	Affirmation and praise Emotional energy/capacity Feelings of safety and trust Felt like family or friend Liked/loved Relationship drives motivation to learn Respect Role model Teacher impact

The second theme revealed that recent high school graduates felt engaged by enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms. This theme represents the synthesis of patterns found in the ways the participants viewed their teachers' enthusiasm – general enthusiasm, enthusiasm for their content, and enthusiasm for their classroom. I noticed commonalities in the participants' descriptions of enthusiastic teachers that led them to experience connected classrooms. When participants experienced enthusiastic teachers who connected with them in class, they reported being engaged as learners. Table 6 presents Theme 2 along with the categories and codes that were grouped under the overarching theme.

**Table 6***Theme 2 With Categories and Codes*

Theme	Categories	Codes
Recent high school graduates felt engaged by enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms.	Teacher enthusiasm	Fun Loves teaching Outgoing Positive attitude Positive voice, smile Welcoming classroom environment
	Classroom connection	Approachable in class Classroom conversations Connection as classroom practice Storytelling in class Understanding

The third theme revealed that recent high school graduates felt engaged by supportive teachers who held them to high expectations. This theme was developed based on repeated patterns across the ways participants viewed being supported in their classrooms by teachers with high expectations for their learning. I noticed recurring ideas in the ways participants described feeling supported to achieve, which was represented by the category *Supporting Excellence* and further developed into this broader theme. When participants felt support from their teachers accompanied by expectations for success, they reported being engaged as learners. Table 7 presents Theme 3 along with the category and codes that were grouped under the overarching theme.

**Table 7***Theme 3 With Category and Codes*

Theme	Category	Codes
Recent high school graduates felt engaged by supportive teachers who held them to high expectations.	Supporting excellence	Always learning Assessment (reassuring/flexible) Attendance and motivation Belief in students Care and help Differentiation Empathy boosts engagement/respect Empathy boosts self-efficacy Feeling known/understood Flexibility High expectations (with support) Individual help Love and diversity Performance Support Warm and demanding

The fourth theme revealed that recent high school graduates felt engaged by active teachers who invited discussion and collaboration. This theme reflects patterns that were consistently present in the ways the participants perceived active, engaging teachers. I noticed recurring ideas in the actions participants described that made them feel engaged by their teachers. These data were represented under the category *Engaging Classrooms* and generated this theme because they captured a key aspect of the participants' shared experience and helped answer the research question by explaining how these actions shaped student engagement. When participants perceived that their teachers practiced active participation in the learning experience, as evidenced through collaboration and discussion, they reported being engaged as learners. Table 8 presents

Theme 4 along with the category and codes that were grouped under the overarching theme.

**Table 8**

*Theme 4 With Category and Codes*

Theme	Category	Codes
Recent high school graduates felt engaged by active teachers who invited discussion and collaboration.	Engaging classrooms	Active teaching Asking questions & listening Change Choice Classroom management Direct instruction Group work Incentives Interaction and debate Life lessons beyond academics Music playing Physical movement strategies Plc, best practices Projects/activities Specific feedback Visuals

The fifth and final theme revealed that recent high school graduates felt disengaged by demanding teachers who seemed not to understand or care about their situations, needs, or perspectives. This theme was shaped by patterns that surfaced across all the participants' experiences and demonstrated the ways the participants perceived disengagement. These data were grouped under the category *Engagement Barriers*, which was a unique category representing the experiences that inhibited the participants' engagement. These data directly contributed to this theme by describing patterns across the participants' shared experiences of barriers to their engagement as learners. When participants perceived a relational deficit as evidenced by a lack of teacher empathy, they

reported being disengaged as learners. Table 9 presents Theme 5 along with the category and codes that were grouped under the overarching theme.

**Table 9**

*Theme 5 With Category and Codes*

Theme	Category	Codes
Recent high school graduates felt disengaged by demanding teachers who seemed not to understand or care about their situations, needs, or perspectives.	Engagement barriers	Boring Cold/bad attitude Demanding Difficult, lack of support Discipline Fair treatment Feeling misunderstood Feeling unwanted/unliked Learning disabilities Perceived conditional care Strict Teacher-centered

**Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant cases were handled as discussed in Chapter 3. Discrepant cases were addressed during data analysis when key words and phrases from one participant did not align with the data collected from the other participants. In this study, one discrepant case occurred. Although the majority of codes aligned clearly with their respective categories and themes, one case challenged the dominant interpretation. This unique example did not contradict the emergent theme but introduced an alternative perspective that enriched the broader category. This unique contribution to the data will be reported and discussed to strengthen the study's trustworthiness. Aside from this case, there were no other discrepant cases.

## Results

The results of this qualitative study represent the perspectives of 12 recent high school graduates who had been educated in a public-school setting and had experiences with the phenomenon of teacher empathy. The data collected from interviews with the participants were analyzed to answer the research question, “What are recent high school graduates’ perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state?” Through the process of data analysis, five themes emerged that answer the research question. These five themes will be presented and discussed to support the findings of the study.

### Theme 1

Recent high school graduates felt engaged by compassionate teachers who fostered trusting relationships. This theme reflects how participants experienced relational care and compassion as foundational to their engagement. Participants were asked to reflect on times when they felt connected to teachers, to describe what it was like to be in their classrooms, and to relate ways in which teachers could better understand and respond to their students. Key codes that led to this theme included *Relationship Drives Motivation to Learn*, *Check In*, *Feelings of Safety and Trust*, and *Respect*. All 12 participants discussed personal experiences related to this theme. One participant said that good student–teacher relationships “affect students because they want to do better; the better the relationship, the better they’re going to want to do in the classroom.” Participants shared that they were motivated to learn when they had positive

relationships with teachers and felt like they understood how they were feeling. Table 10 presents excerpts from the raw data that supported Theme 1.

**Table 10**

*Key Responses Supporting Theme 1*

Participant	Excerpt
Participant 1	<i>That's how I knew they cared. When in a moment where I probably wasn't myself, they took action, and they pulled me in when they didn't have to.</i>
Participant 4	<i>I knew I could trust him, so I would tell him, and he always had empathy.</i>
Participant 8	<i>If a teacher sees that a student is physically upset, and they check on them, it makes you feel noticed by the teacher, which will make you more engaged with what they are teaching because you have respect for them. Getting your students to respect you, so then they work hard, not just for themselves, but they work hard because they want it to show a reflection of your teaching.</i>
Participant 10	<i>She just wants to know what's going on in your life, and that makes you want to learn.</i>
Participant 11	<i>It affected the way I learned, because her reaching out made me very grateful for a person like that. And because of that, I wanted to do good. I thought, in my mind, "Well, she's going this extra way for me, and I should reciprocate that same thing."</i>

Participants reported that teacher check-ins were a powerful motivator, as reflected in the data: Check In was the most frequently used code for Category 1 and the second most frequently used code for Theme 1. Similarly, several participants shared that teachers responding to them by sharing advice or their own perspective was a motivating connector. All 12 participants shared experiences that were coded either *Check In* or *Sharing Perspective/Advice*. Participants highlighted teachers' expressions of compassionate understanding as central to their engagement as learners.

Recent high school graduates shared that teachers' efforts to check on students, share advice, or take time to connect outside of structured class time motivated students to be engaged inside structured class time. Some participants reported that they were able

to remain calm and avoid becoming overwhelmed, including in advanced high school classes, when they had good relationships with their teachers. Participants emphasized that trusting relationships not only enabled them to approach their teachers for support with personal issues but also encouraged them to ask questions in class and advocate for their own learning. Some participants also shared that privacy mattered. Participant 1 noted, “I don’t want teachers to check on me in front of the whole class.” Participants described compassionate, trustworthy teachers who fostered relationships as being warm, safe, and comfortable.

Together, these reflections revealed how the participants’ connection to compassionate teachers translated into their motivation to engage as learners. This was evidenced by *Relationship Drives Motivation to Learn* being the most frequently occurring code in the data for Theme 1. One participant explained,

[Good student–teacher relationships] can make or break their high school experience. I’ve had so many friends in high school be like, “I hate this teacher, I hate this class because of the teacher.” You’re seeing us eight hours of the day. You’re seeing us more than we see our own family. If you form a good connection with a child, and you’re helping them grow on a daily basis, then you’re actually doing your job, not just teaching the curriculum.

Participants consistently described that the trust and compassion they felt toward teachers were key to their experiences of feeling motivated and engaged. Participants felt valued and connected when teachers checked on them to see how they were doing, not just academically, but also emotionally.

Several participants shared their perspectives on teachers having the emotional intelligence to set healthy boundaries, value their privacy, and offer them space to regulate. These experiences reflect the participants' views that a teacher's compassionate understanding must be balanced with professional awareness and emotional attunement. The narratives also highlighted that participants felt motivated by these emotionally aware teachers, whom they described as great teachers. When asked what one thing they felt was most important for readers of this study to understand, one participant stated that certain teachers were special simply because of their care. The participant felt that if a teacher would "just simply care" for their students and their content, they had what it takes to be a great teacher. Participants shared that these great teachers sometimes felt more like family, and their classrooms felt like home. This theme suggests that recent high school graduates perceived teacher empathy through trusting relationships and compassionate understanding. These data reinforce the concept that emotional intelligence and warmth are key components to engaging learners.

## **Theme 2**

Recent high school graduates felt engaged by enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms. This theme reveals that participants were aware of their teachers' enthusiasm and efforts to prioritize connection as a meaningful part of their classroom practice. Participants were asked to consider times when they were the most engaged and to describe things teachers did or said to be engaging. Key codes that led to this theme included *Connection as Classroom Practice*, *Understanding*, *Fun*, *Approachable in Class*, and *Positive Attitude*. All 12 participants shared personal stories to support this

theme. One participant shared, “Classrooms are the most engaging when teachers are more enthusiastic about learning, because when they’re more enthusiastic about learning, it kind of rubs off on the kids.” Participants noted that they were engaged by positive, fun teachers who took the initiative to connect with them at the classroom door and continued to make connections throughout their class time together. Table 11 presents excerpts from the raw data that supported Theme 2.

**Table 11**

*Key Responses Supporting Theme 2*

Participant	Excerpt
Participant 2	<i>[Teachers] presenting themselves in a fun way makes you want to be there.</i>
Participant 3	<i>They understood that students have a lot going on in their lives, in school and out, and understood what we’re feeling.</i>
Participant 4	<i>She would always take time out of class time to ask us questions about our life and connect with us, instead of hopping right into the lesson and then teaching all the way to the bell.</i>
Participant 5	<i>Classrooms are the most engaging when teachers are more approachable.</i>
Participant 7	<i>[Students are most engaged by] a teacher with a positive attitude and ready to take on whatever she gets, because some kids are not going to be in the best mood, because you don’t know what house they came from that morning, or what they’re gonna go home to.</i>

Recent high school graduates expressed that they felt most engaged in classrooms with teachers who were positive and fun. This was evident in the data with *Fun* being the most frequently observed code for Category 3 and the third most frequently occurring code for Theme 2. All but one of the participants referenced fun and positive as central characteristics of engaging teachers. One participant noted the perceived impact teachers can have on students and stated that “One day that you’re not happy, but you act happy, you can be a difference in a student’s life.” Participant 12 did not use *Positive* and *Fun* but rather highlighted *Approachable* and *Understanding* as important characteristics of

engaging teachers. All participants were most engaged by teachers who demonstrated warmth, whether through a more playful approach or through meaningful classroom conversation.

In addition to general positivity and fun, recent high school graduates described that teachers' efforts to create welcoming classroom environments motivated students' engagement. One participant described feeling wanted and welcomed in the classroom because of a teacher's intentional greeting: "Like if you walk into class, you hear your teacher say, 'Hello! Good morning!' instead of what they're gonna start working on today." Participants also expressed an appreciation for teachers who were outgoing and seemed to genuinely love teaching. Participants noted that their teachers' enthusiasm for teaching was expressed in observable ways, such as smiling, laughing, and an excited tone of voice. The impact of this enthusiasm on one participant was summarized by the following excerpt: "The fact that I could tell that she really enjoyed what she was teaching made me want to try a little bit harder." Participants reported that their teachers' expressions of genuine enthusiasm catalyzed their own enthusiasm and engagement as learners.

While teachers' enthusiasm motivated their students, participants also described instances in which that enthusiasm expanded into an authentic classroom connection between teachers and students. The data revealed that *Connection as Classroom Practice* was the most frequently used code for Category 4 and for all of Theme 2. All but one of the participants referenced this connection as an important method of engaging learners. One participant shared the following classroom connection story:

The teacher would pick one [popsicle stick] out, and we'd do an interview every single day for about 5 minutes. He learns about the students with questions like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And he'd be sitting there and really wants to know what you're thinking.

Participants described benefiting from increased engagement when teachers prioritized connecting during classroom time. As one participant shared, it did not have to be a large amount of time: "She'd take 5 minutes out of class just to talk about what's going on in school." Another participant expressed that classroom connection led to increased respect for his teacher: "He earned my respect mainly just because he was reaching out, asked me about how [my sport] is going, and talked to me about different things." While most participants shared stories of connecting with teachers regarding their personal lives and extracurricular activities, one participant shared that the connection could be as simple as hearing their name in class:

Using students as examples, you're going to pay attention to what they're saying, because you feel like it links to you. I've had teachers use my name as an example. Even just hearing your name, it makes you pay attention more.

Participants shared that when passion extended from content to connection, it led to energetic classrooms characterized by relevant conversation, approachable teachers, shared understanding, and storytelling. Participants consistently described teachers who created classrooms defined by connection as those who were instrumental in their sense of feeling understood and engaged during their school experience. When asked if it was

important for teachers to understand how students are feeling, one participant shared that she wished teachers would do the following:

Look past things and try to understand how a kid is feeling about something, even if it's just him simply acting out, there's a reason behind it. And if you don't at least try to meet almost every student with that type of understanding then you won't really make a difference in your teaching career.

Participants' sense of being understood led them to view teachers as approachable. One participant emphasized, "Classrooms are the most engaging when teachers are more approachable." These experiences suggest that a teacher's ability to engage students through genuine enthusiasm for teaching was amplified when that enthusiasm expanded to seizing opportunities for personal connection during instructional time. Participants shared that intentional moments spent connecting personally with their teacher increased their motivation to learn. Also, participants respected their teachers' efforts to bring positive energy into the classroom. One participant recalled a teacher choosing to be positive on a morning after experiencing a car wreck. Moments like these were recalled as impactful because the participants recognized the teacher's values. The data revealed that participants perceived the effort teachers invested in fostering enthusiastic connections in their classrooms as worthwhile and associated it with increased student engagement. These findings indicate that participants experienced feelings of belonging and meaningful involvement in classroom cultures led by empathetic teachers.

### Theme 3

Recent high school graduates felt engaged by supportive teachers who held them to high expectations. This theme highlighted the participants' experiences with teachers who balanced high expectations for their learning with understanding, care, flexibility and support. Participants were asked to recall teachers who could be described as warm, demanding, or both. Participants were also asked to describe times when they felt understood or misunderstood by teachers and to describe things teachers did or said that made them feel that way. Key codes that led to this theme included *Care and Help*, *Feeling Known/Understood*, *High Expectations (with Support)*, *Empathy Boosts Engagement and Respect*, and *Attendance and Motivation*. All 12 participants related experiences that supported this theme. One participant shared how it felt to have high expectations from a caring teacher:

It showed that [teachers] were more involved and cared about me if they would come up to me and say, "Hey, I know you can do better than this," and then they'd either make me redo [the assignment] or expected me to do more on the next.

Participants noted that they cared more about a class when their teachers cared about them. Participants also expressed a desire to attend classes when they knew that their teacher understood them, expected much of them, and would help them succeed in the class. Table 12 presents excerpts from the raw data that supported Theme 3.

**Table 12***Key Responses Supporting Theme 3*

Participant	Excerpt
Participant 1	<i>Here are my high expectations, and here's how to attain them - that's being warm. It's okay to have high expectations but teach me how to reach those.</i>
Participant 2	<i>I was excited every day to go. It was hard work, but it was really rewarding.</i>
Participant 6	<i>Feeling understood by the teacher made me want to be there.</i>
Participant 9	<i>It motivated me, because I knew she was still trying to help me, and I knew that it was possible.</i>
Participant 11	<i>The fact that he was both warm and demanding made me not only respect him more, but with him being close to me and the respect, it made me okay with the demand.</i>

Participants reported that teachers who acted as warm demanders were central to their motivation, engagement, and performance. This motivation was evidenced in the data with codes that reflected a combination of care and expectation. Theme 3 resulted from only one category, Category 5: Supporting Excellence. The most frequently occurring codes for Category 5 and Theme 3 were *Care and Help* and *Feeling Known/Understood*. These codes reflect the feelings participants shared that their teachers' empathy and efforts to understand and support them at school were key characteristics of their success as students. All 12 participants shared experiences that were coded *Care and Help* and *Feeling Known/Understood*. One participant shared about their experiences with feeling cared for and known:

For most of the teachers, it's kind of cut and dry. There was a select few teachers where if I told them my situation, they really cared. For others, they would have just been like, "I'm sorry." For teachers like Ms. Smith, when they're stopping what they're doing and asking about how I am lately, that really touched me a lot,

how they cared. That kind of empathy, you don't really see a lot in teachers, especially during school. And that [empathy] just made me feel like she cared about what was going on with me, and that I mattered.

Every participant shared that when their teachers practiced teacher empathy, it was a motivating influence on their engagement as learners.

Theme 3 extends the participants' emphasis on feeling known and understood to encompass their academic performance and the influence of their teachers' high expectations. One participant described their experience with a teacher who had high expectations:

All my teachers expect a lot, but some that genuinely cared would come up to me if I'm not focused or if they knew I wasn't doing my best. They would be like, "Hey, I know you can do better than this. I expect more from you." They would reassure me that they expect more from me.

Participants felt cared for when teachers noticed their lack of motivation and responded with empathetic concern. Participants repeatedly described teachers who recognized their potential and expected more of them as effective teachers who were able to push them to do their best academically. Participants recalled that when those teachers also offered support, they felt increased engagement, a greater fondness for the teacher, and appreciation for the class. One participant described the influence of a teacher by saying, "The fact that he was warm, but also demanding, it made me respect him. And that kind of respect, it carried through to my grades." This balance of warmth and demand was expressed by some participants as unique and not characteristic of many teachers. A

participant noted, “Not many teachers can have that 50-50 of warmth and demand. Some teachers can’t even have it in the first place, good demand. Some teachers’ demand is - you do this, or you’re in trouble.” Another participant recalled the benefit of the balance, “I think it’s a happy medium. He wants you to do your best and shows that in a demanding way, but he also is there when you need him to be.” These narratives highlighted the participants’ feelings that empathetic teachers who supported academic excellence were key to making students feel supported, engaged, and successful.

Several participants shared their perspectives on teachers’ empathetic support through individualized help, flexibility, and differentiation. These perspectives reflect the participants’ feelings that a student’s academic success may be due to a teacher’s ability to recognize and respond to individual needs. When teachers adapted instruction and expectations, participants felt seen, supported, and confident. Participants recalled being impacted by teachers who allowed test retakes or extended deadlines to support hectic schedules. Participants felt that these teachers believed in them and described them as those who “love to help every student be successful,” “want the best side of me,” and “had a positive outlook on all of our futures.” The narratives also highlighted that several participants had academic success, with one sharing that students “started performing better than we ever had,” and another recounting that it was “definitely the class I got the best grades in that year.” These perspectives support the idea that recent high school graduates were more engaged by empathetic teachers who balanced care and understanding with challenging expectations for their success.

**Theme 4**

Recent high school graduates felt engaged by active teachers who invited discussion and collaboration. Participants highlighted specific strategies teachers used to create classrooms that felt engaging. They were asked to describe what an engaging teacher and an engaging classroom looked and sounded like, and to recall times when they felt most engaged and how teachers motivated them during those experiences. Key codes that led to this theme included *Asking Questions and Listening*, *Active Teaching*, *Interaction and Debate*, *Group Work*, and *Life Lessons Beyond Academics*. All 12 participants contributed perspectives and experiences that led to the development of this theme. One participant highlighted that a teacher's curiosity is the spark that fuels an engaging classroom, explaining that "If the classroom's engaging, then the teacher wants to hear about what the student has to say and what the student is thinking about." Participants expressed that they felt the most engaged when teachers were actively engaged and intentionally worked to include all students' thoughts and ideas through meaningful discussion and collaborative group activities. Table 13 presents excerpts from the raw data that supported Theme 4.

**Table 13***Key Responses Supporting Theme 4*

Participant	Excerpt
Participant 1	<i>Yes, lecture us and teach your curriculum, but also, what's a life lesson?</i>
Participant 5	<i>Group activities, or when they open it up to group discussions - I think that really gets the class going and talking.</i>
Participant 6	<i>I was the most engaged in learning when we were talking about [controversial topic]. My teacher brought up the fact that he died, but then we talked about it more and more, and I was like, wow, that makes a lot more sense. Just talking about stuff does help open the mind.</i>
Participant 10	<i>[I was motivated to be highly engaged when] the teacher makes sure everyone is engaged, and everyone is getting to talk, and the teacher is listening to everyone.</i>
Participant 11	<i>[To be engaging, a teacher can] actively talk to multiple students throughout the classroom, asking multiple students throughout the room, not just the ones that people feel are the smart students.</i>

Participants emphasized that when teachers modeled active engagement in the classroom, it led to increased levels of student engagement. This engagement was represented in the data by codes focused on interaction through discussion and group participation. Theme 4 was the result of consensus across the interviews that students are more engaged in classrooms characterized by dialogue and collaboration. Theme 4 encompasses Category 6: Engaging Classroom. The most frequently occurring code for Category 6 and Theme 4 was *Asking Questions and Listening*. This code represents the engaging experiences participants had when teachers created space for students to share their perspectives. All but one participant described the salience of a teacher facilitating meaningful student discussion by asking questions and listening. Participants reported being most engaged when contributing to classroom discussions with their teacher and peers, indicating the perceived relevance of these interactions, whether individually with a teacher, in pairs with other students, in small groups, or as part of the entire classroom.

Participants repeatedly emphasized experiences in which teachers intentionally included everyone. One participant described,

An engaging teacher is talking to students throughout the classroom, selecting the students in the corner, the students up front, people in the very far corner of the class. He'd ask them a question, but it was never in a serious manner. You could get it wrong, and it was completely fine.

This narrative not only supports the necessity of inclusivity, but it also highlights the sense of safety that students feel when multiple perspectives are shared. Another participant shared that engaging teachers should “interact with every single student instead of generalizing to the class.” Participants felt respected when teachers talked to “multiple students throughout the room, not just the ones that people feel are the smart students.” In addition to emphasizing discussion, accounts of classroom experiences revealed that students enjoy working collaboratively in groups to create a product or solve a problem. Every participant shared that engaging with their teacher and peers through discussion and group activities influenced their engagement as learners.

Theme 4 included several infrequently used codes, demonstrating that participants had diverse experiences that they found uniquely engaging, although these were not prominent across the data. These findings support the idea that feelings of engagement may result from uniquely different experiences for students. Although discussion was central to the concept of engagement, these data supported the centrality of active teachers who can understand the motivating factors unique to each student. One participant described his perspective on engagement:

[Bored students are] going to want to do something more engaging. But if you have something that's actively going on, where the student's kind of forced [to engage] in that scenario, they're going to follow along and pay attention more.

Participants felt engaged when teachers offered change and choice. One participant shared, "Whenever teachers switch up seats constantly, it keeps you on your toes." Another contributed, "There needs to be a good switch-up between paperwork, computer work, interactive stuff - getting the students involved, or you're just making them sit at a desk." One recent high school graduate summarized what worked for them by sharing that students appreciated it when teachers used strategies that were "interactive or just stuff to shake it up a little bit." Participants repeatedly described teachers who were willing to try new strategies to reach them and push them to engage. One participant recommended that teachers build off what works in other classrooms, explaining: "This one great teacher did this. Let's all take from that and then figure out what works for all of us," and suggested that this would lead to "all 7 or 8 classroom teachers [being] great teachers." These narratives revealed that empathy was conveyed to participants through engaging teachers who actively involved themselves with their students in the classroom. Graduates recalled these teachers as central to motivating and engaging students through dynamic, inclusive learning experiences. Ultimately, the participants' perspectives suggested that active teachers both model and spark engagement. Participants felt that when active teachers facilitated collaborative discussion, they created classrooms that piqued students' interest, respect, and involvement.

**Theme 5**

Recent high school graduates felt disengaged by demanding teachers who seemed not to care about their situations, needs, or perspectives. The final theme illuminated the participants' feelings when they disengaged from learning due to a perceived absence of empathy or support from their teachers. Participants reported experiences with teachers who appeared to lack concern for them as individuals with unique needs and circumstances. These former students were asked to describe teachers they perceived as demanding. Participants were also asked to recall instances when they felt misunderstood by a teacher, what actions or words led to that feeling, and how it affected them in class. Key codes that informed this theme included *Feeling Misunderstood; Difficult, Lack of Support; and Demanding*. This theme emerged from data contributed by all 12 participants. One participant explained, "I didn't want to be engaged in that class or listen to what she had to say, because I felt like I wasn't understood, so I didn't want to have a connection with the teacher." This excerpt reflects similar feelings shared across the respondents related to disconnection with teachers and disengagement in class. As students, the participants felt disengaged when they perceived that teachers did not see them as individuals or support them in their efforts to meet the teachers' academic demands. Table 14 presents excerpts from the raw data that supported Theme 5.

**Table 14***Key Responses Supporting Theme 5*

Participant	Excerpt
Participant 1	<i>You can have high expectations, but you can also be a teacher who helps kids succeed with high expectations. I felt like there were expectations, and I had no way of reaching them.</i>
Participant 4	<i>I fell behind on one assignment. I was trying to explain to him that I had extra days to do the assignment since it was school business. And he just didn't really understand. It made me not want to try my best in the class, because he wasn't listening or understanding. He didn't seem to care.</i>
Participant 7	<i>I felt discouraged to even keep trying. Sometimes I'd get checked out earlier just so I didn't have to go to his class.</i>
Participant 9	<i>I felt scared that I wasn't going to be able to get it done. I felt scared because of the pressure to perform.</i>

Participants shared that they often felt disengaged from learning when their teachers were too strict, neglected empathetic understanding of the students' unique situations, or set expectations that felt unreachable due to insufficient support. Some participants felt that these negative experiences led to their desire to avoid a teacher or a class altogether. Other participants expressed a lack of hope with learning difficult content or a new disinterest in content they formerly enjoyed. Interviewees shed light on the discouragement they experienced from negative teacher–student relationships. One participant shared that a teacher “turned me away from trying to do better.” Another recent graduate reflected on a teacher and said, “He’s just a mean person, and if I see him, I’ll say hi, but that’s it. I don’t want to affiliate myself with him, because he was rude, unkind, and harsh to me the entirety of my class.” Feelings of being misunderstood led to decreased motivation. Feelings of demand without support resulted in reduced engagement. These narratives conveyed that teachers who are not perceived as balancing high expectations with relational warmth can lead to students’ feelings of being unseen,

unheard, and even unsafe. Together, these reflections reveal that students' perceived lack of teacher care served as a substantial barrier to their engagement as learners.

Theme 5 embodied several less prominent codes. Although less prevalent in the data, the additional codes were analogous and reflected the graduates' responses to teachers they perceived as impersonal, disparate, or unstimulating. Codes such as *Cold*, *Strict*, and *Feeling Unwanted/Unliked* further supported the emotional barriers that all participants reported experiencing with teachers. Other codes included *Learning Disabilities*, *Fair Treatment*, and *Perceived Conditional Care*, and represented the tension some graduates felt with teachers they perceived as preferential. These data support the idea that experiences of disengagement resulted from participants' perceptions of relational disconnect and deficits in the practice of teacher empathy. One recent high school graduate shared their experience with teacher apathy and their resulting disengagement, describing that the teacher seemed unconcerned with whether students slept in class or played on their phones. The participant explained:

He would kind of pick on you if you didn't do his work, which kind of ticked me off a little bit, but it didn't make me want to or anything. I just kind of stayed on my phone, which sucked. I didn't want to be on my phone. So, I would always pick the L [loss] on the assignments, and I failed, unfortunately.

This narrative highlighted the desire participants expressed to have empathetic teachers who were both understanding and demanding, which included high expectations for students' achievement and behavior, balanced with relational warmth. Participants expressed a desire to engage in learning; however, they felt that when demanding

teachers failed to connect with them relationally, the disconnect created barriers to engagement, resulting in feelings of misunderstanding, frustration, boredom, and hopelessness. This theme captured participants' perspectives that deficits in the practice of teacher empathy contributed to students' disengagement, supporting the previous themes' indication that participants valued the practice of teacher empathy as key to sustaining students' motivation and engagement.

### **Discrepant Cases**

As themes were refined during the process of thematic analysis, one case emerged that was identified as discrepant because it differed from the data in a unique way. Participant 9 shared the fear that came from an imbalance of warmth and demand throughout the school year:

It was such a contrastive level of learning, because for a majority of the year, whenever I did learn things, it was more a surface level. Towards the end, it was kind of cramming. I crammed a whole year of meaningful learning into that last quarter. The teacher was both warm and demanding, but for the first three quarters, it was more so just warm. Towards March I'd say it kind of switched. I'll say August through March, the teacher was 80% warm, 20% demanding, and then March through May, it was the opposite. That was where I became scared.

The response from Participant 9 regarding warmth and demand in this context was unexpected. No other participant described a warm demander as anything other than a teacher who demonstrated an equivalent balance of warmth and demand throughout the school year. In this case, they described a shift in the teacher over the course of the year,

which the participant found disconcerting. Although this case differed from the other data, it was insufficient to warrant the development of another theme. Ultimately, this case deepened the development of Theme 5 by reinforcing the broader findings and highlighting perspectives that teachers' strong demand, absent relational warmth, led to students' feelings of disengagement and even fear.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

This qualitative study addressed all four criteria for trustworthiness, reflecting the rigor and quality of the study. The following section details how trustworthiness was established through the evidence of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria ensured that the study portrayed the participants' perspectives and experiences authentically (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The strategies discussed below were implemented as described in Chapter 3 without any modifications or adjustments.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility, which is the internal validity of this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), was achieved through several strategies. The study's purpose and research question were intentionally aligned with participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis. Because there was alignment among the research methods I used to gather data, I was able to answer the research question. Each step in the process supported the purpose of exploring recent high school graduates' perspectives as they recalled how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage them as learners.

Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study as a check to ensure neutrality and unbiased representation of the data. As I sought to represent the participants' perspectives authentically, I confirmed that all participants were asked the same questions and remained mindful of my own perspectives throughout the process. I kept a journal to practice reflexivity, which helped me reflect on the data throughout the collection and analysis processes by documenting my thoughts, assumptions, and interpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Reflexive journaling kept me cognizant of my positionality as an educational leader and supported my neutrality as a researcher. This awareness enabled me to set aside my personal beliefs and to elevate the participants' perspectives to guide theme development.

Credibility was also reinforced through member checks following each interview. Participants were asked to review their responses for accuracy. Following data collection, participants were sent the transcripts of their interviews. I asked each participant to review the transcript and let me know if there were any discrepancies between what they intended to communicate and what the transcript represented. No participants reported a misrepresentation of their perspectives or errors in the data. This process enhanced the study's credibility by ensuring that the data correctly represented the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Finally, credibility was achieved through data saturation. Collecting data from 12 participants supported the internal validity of the study. Throughout data analysis, I engaged in multiple cycles of coding and reflection to discover complexities in the data. This recursive process established credibility and allowed me to explain complex patterns

across the nuanced experiences that participants described (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As analysis progressed, I became confident that the emerging themes authentically represented a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Data saturation occurred when participants' responses were repetitive. This was evident at a surface level, as I observed very similar responses. During coding, however, I found that the first 59 codes had been created by Interview 5. Eleven codes were produced to represent the data from Interviews 6 and 7. Interviews 8 and 9 only produced one new code each. There were no new codes from Interviews 10 through 12. This point of saturation confirmed the sufficiency of the data to answer the research question.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was achieved through a small but purposeful sample of 12 participants, the rich data they provided, and thick description, which offered the context and detail necessary for readers of the study to connect the data to other settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I selected 12 recent high school graduates who offered unique and diverse perspectives regarding their experiences across many schools, classrooms, and teachers. The interview questions were open-ended and written to elicit rich, detailed narratives from participants as they described their experiences with teacher empathy. After analyzing the transcripts, I included thick description, a detailed description of both the data and the context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), enabling readers to transfer the findings to other contexts and populations.

**Dependability**

The dependability of the study was determined through my adherence to the research design, including a transparent approach to data collection and a clear process for thematic analysis. The research design, which multiple advisers vetted, was rigorous and ensured consistency between the raw data and the emerging themes. Dependability was established as the study's findings consistently aligned with the data. As discussed in Chapter 3, the stability and consistency of the data attest to the study's dependability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because the data were unique to the participants' perspectives and experiences, the dependability of the study does not ensure that the study could be replicated; however, detailed descriptions and processes for data collection and analysis would support another researcher in designing a similar study. The research method enabled me to collect the data necessary to interpret the results and answer the research question.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability of the data was established through reflexivity and a clear audit trail. My subjectivity as an educator was cautiously addressed to protect the interpretation of the data from my own opinions and biases. To maintain the integrity of the study and to ensure my positionality did not influence interpretation, I engaged in reflexivity through journaling. Acknowledging and reflecting on my own opinions supported my efforts to focus on the data without personal bias. The audit trail ensured that I adhered to the planned data collection and analysis procedures. Data collection was systematic, enabling the study's results to be confirmed. The data audit could be reviewed to

determine how the data were organized, interpreted, and led to the study's findings. The combination of reflexivity and transparent data organization confirms the trustworthiness and confirmability of the study's results.

### **Summary**

This basic qualitative study explored the perspectives of recent high school graduates regarding their experiences with the phenomenon of teacher empathy. The research addressed one question: What are recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners in an urban school district in a Southern state? To answer the research question, the study highlighted the collective experiences of 12 recent graduates with the phenomenon of teacher empathy. Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory and Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy guided the study. Recent high school graduates consistently emphasized that the practice of teacher empathy was central to their engagement as learners. The interviewees described empathetic teachers as compassionate, enthusiastic, supportive, and active; and shared that these teacher attributes contributed to relationships and environments that fostered their engagement. Collectively, the findings suggest that the practice of teacher empathy, expressed through relational trust, connected classrooms, warm demand, and collaborative strategies, serves as a key approach for engaging learners. The findings directly address the research question by showing how the practice of teacher empathy shapes engagement through both interpersonal relationships and classroom practices. By highlighting recent high school graduates' perspectives, the findings revealed how these participants experienced teacher empathy in real classroom

contexts and how their engagement as learners was influenced by the ways teachers understood, acknowledged, and responded to their needs.

In Chapter 5, the findings of the study are presented to answer the research question through the lens of the conceptual framework and the literature review. The study's limitations will be presented and discussed, along with recommendations for future research that could build upon the findings. The chapter concludes with the study's implications for educational practice.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore recent high school graduates' perspectives on how teachers practiced empathy as an approach to engage learners. While these perspectives have been underrepresented in the literature, they are central to understanding relevant ways to engage current and future students (Aldrup et al., 2022; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023). Consequently, I sought to gain insight into the perspectives and lived experiences of these participants with the phenomenon of teacher empathy, guided by Goleman's emotional intelligence theory (1995) and Kleinfeld's warm demander pedagogy (1975). Through semistructured interviews, data were collected and analyzed to identify patterns in how recent high school graduates described the practice of teacher empathy as either supporting or hindering their engagement as learners. The ultimate aim of this study was to deepen educators' understanding of the practice of teacher empathy by exploring the perspectives of graduates who have recently experienced contemporary classroom dynamics.

The findings from this study revealed five themes in which recent high school graduates consistently viewed the practice of teacher empathy as central to their engagement as learners. Participants shared experiences both in and out of their classrooms with teachers who shaped their motivation to learn. These key findings were developed through data analysis and interpretation. The first key finding is that recent high school graduates felt engaged by compassionate teachers who fostered trusting relationships. Participants reported that the practice of teacher empathy fostered engagement through relational trust. The participants shared experiences with empathetic

teachers who made time to connect with students and built relationships that cultivated respect and trust. The second key finding is that recent high school graduates felt engaged by enthusiastic teachers who created connected classrooms. Participants shared that the practice of teacher empathy fostered engagement through classroom culture. Participants perceived that teacher empathy led to engaging classrooms characterized by intentional connection and teacher enthusiasm. The third key finding is that recent high school graduates felt engaged by supportive teachers who held them to high expectations. Participants shared the perspective that the practice of teacher empathy fostered engagement through balanced warmth and demand. Participants related experiences with empathetic teachers who were able to integrate high expectations for student learning with understanding, care, flexibility, and support. The fourth key finding is that recent high school graduates felt engaged by active teachers who invited discussion and collaboration. Participants recounted experiences in which the practice of teacher empathy fostered engagement through relevant discussions and shared learning with peers. Participants related that the practice of teacher empathy led to engaging classrooms characterized by inclusive discussion and group collaboration. The fifth key finding is that recent high school graduates felt disengaged by demanding teachers who seemed not to care about their situations, needs, or perspectives. Participants felt that when teachers lacked empathy, it created barriers to student engagement by diminishing perceived support and fostering feelings of misunderstanding. Chapter 5 presents the interpretation of these findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and a conclusion.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Participants described numerous ways in which their experiences with the practice of teacher empathy fostered learner engagement, whereas their perceived lack of teacher empathy posed barriers to engagement. Five themes emerged from the data analysis and constitute the study's key findings. Theme 1 indicates that recent high school graduates were motivated to engage in learning when they perceived relational trust between teachers and students. The findings reflected that participants perceived the practice of teacher empathy through positive teacher–student relationships and active compassion. Participants explained that relational connections with teachers motivated them to learn. These recent high school graduates recalled feeling connected to teachers who demonstrated compassionate care and actively sought to understand their students' unique needs. Theme 2 describes cultural components of engagement, which participants attributed to teachers' intentional efforts to connect with students and to connect students with one another. Theme 2 emphasizes that recent high school graduates reported feeling engaged when teacher enthusiasm created a positive classroom culture of connectedness. Theme 3 conveys that the participants felt motivated to engage in learning by teachers who coupled high expectations for their academic achievement with warm support. Theme 4 identifies attributes of engaging classrooms, highlighting the value participants placed on discussion and collaborative group work as indicators of engagement. Theme 5 acknowledges barriers to learner engagement, expressing the participants' feelings of frustration and disengagement when they perceived that teachers did not understand or care about them personally. The themes convey the ways students engaged or disengaged

in learning due to the perceived presence or absence of the practice of teacher empathy. Participants shared that student engagement was shaped by the practice of teacher empathy, deepening when students felt understood and supported, and declining when they felt misunderstood and unsupported. These findings were interpreted in relation to the relevant literature and through the lens of the conceptual framework. The literature review contextualized the research within the areas of teacher–student relationships, engaging learners, and empathy in teaching. The conceptual framework integrated Goleman’s (1995) emotional intelligence theory with Kleinfeld’s (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy, supporting the idea that the practice of teacher empathy can lead to learner engagement.

### **Literature Review**

The first theme from the data revealed that when participants perceived their teachers as practicing empathy to develop trusting relationships with them, the relational investment fueled learner engagement. Theme 1 represented a key insight shared by all participants that was evident throughout the data. Eleven of the 12 participants specifically referenced the way relationships with their teachers not only supported their engagement as learners but also served as a key source of motivation. Participants consistently positioned relational trust as the context that sustained their motivation to engage. This finding integrates earlier work with student experience, offering insight into why teacher–student relationships influence learners’ engagement (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 2022).

Participants recalled specific ways teachers practiced empathy to foster relational trust, highlighting moments of individual connection that communicated genuine care for them as people and cultivated mutual respect. Feeling known and valued through positive teacher–student relationships fostered reciprocal care in participants, who described being motivated to work harder for trusted teachers. These accounts help explain why prior studies emphasize the importance of teacher care over content and identify the practice of teacher empathy as foundational to engagement (Newcomer, 2018; Noddings, 2003; Wynn et al., 2022). The theme also situates student experience alongside existing claims that teacher–student relationships are second in importance only to the quality of a teacher in the effect they have on student learning (Hattie, 2023). For participants, this represents a salient finding because relational trust with their teachers made school feel meaningful, shaping their motivation and the extent to which they engaged in learning.

The second theme from the data captured participants’ experiences with how the practice of teacher empathy extended beyond individual relationships to broadly shape classroom culture and support learner engagement. Participants described classroom experiences in which teachers practiced empathy to support a holistic feeling of safety, connection, and belonging. Participants recalled that the practice of teacher empathy fostered a collective classroom environment, through which they described experiencing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement alongside their peers. This finding adds student-centered nuance to existing research by affirming from the student perspective that engagement is closely connected to teachers’ efforts to translate meaningful

individual relationships into a shared classroom culture (Araya & Martin, 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Zhao et al., 2021).

Recent high school graduates expressed awareness of the empathetic strategies teachers used and the student responses that sustained a culture of connection, including listening, storytelling, debating, and asking questions. Within these environments, participants described feeling connected, understood, and engaged. Previous research indicated that students are able to decode teachers' empathy through verbal and nonverbal communication, evaluate teachers' capacity to foster positive relationships through instructional practices, and engage more fully in classrooms characterized by positive relationships. Participants' accounts complement prior research emphasizing the credibility of students' perceptions by demonstrating how their perceptions of teachers and classroom culture shaped emotional and cognitive engagement (Vomund & Miller, 2024; Zhao et al., 2021). By centering students' perspectives as the recipients of teacher empathy, this theme deepens understanding of how empathetic practices are experienced collectively and how classroom culture can emerge from teachers' relational investments. Participants described that empathetic classroom cultures transformed learning into a shared, supportive experience, strengthening both their connection to peers and their engagement.

The third theme reveals participants' shared belief that the practice of teacher empathy—extending from individual relationships to classroom culture—was closely associated with learner engagement through teachers' skillful balance of relational warmth and active demand. Participants consistently described their most fulfilling

academic successes as occurring with teachers who demonstrated genuine care while maintaining high expectations. These recent high school graduates recalled teachers who sought to understand their individual circumstances, offered flexibility when needed, and supported them in meeting established expectations. Participants described appreciating academic demand when it was expressed within the context of relational warmth. Through this approach, participants felt understood, believed in, and encouraged, which sustained their motivation even during challenging personal circumstances. These accounts reflect what the literature describes as warm demander pedagogy, in which teachers balance relational warmth with active insistence on student learning (Hammond, 2014; Franklin & Harrington, 2019; Meyers et al., 2019).

From the participants' perspectives, this approach communicated that their teachers' expectations were grounded in a belief in students' abilities. Participants interpreted this integration of warmth and demand as care and respect, which shaped their willingness to persevere and engage. These findings provide nuanced accounts of how students navigated personal challenges within demanding academic contexts, extending the literature that emphasizes the role of warm demander practices in supporting student engagement. By centering students' classroom experiences, this theme illustrates how the practice of teacher empathy can serve not only as a relational strategy but also as an instructional practice that upholds high expectations while supporting student engagement. In participants' experiences, the combination of warmth and demand garnered feelings of support and motivation as they persisted in meeting rigorous learning expectations.

The fourth theme highlights participants' experiences with engagement as an interactive process in which both students and teachers contributed to a dynamic learning environment. Participants described behaviors that reflected their own engagement, including asking questions, seeking help, expressing opinions, and participating in groups—all of which they attributed to enhanced learning. Teacher engagement was perceived through empathetic listening, classroom conversation, visible enthusiasm, active participation, and energetic teaching. Participants emphasized that teacher engagement motivated their own engagement, describing this as a reciprocal experience.

These experiences illustrate the interplay between student and teacher engagement, extending previous research by offering a student-centered perspective on teacher behaviors that foster engagement (Harbour et al., 2015; Patall et al., 2018; Pedler et al., 2020). These accounts add nuance to the literature that identifies teacher engagement through being available, increasing communication, interacting with students, showing enthusiasm, facilitating collaboration, celebrating student success, and offering positive feedback (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Berkovich, 2020; Bockmier-Sommers et al., 2017). This theme also emphasizes the student perspective, showing that teachers who practice empathy and are visibly engaged create classrooms in which students reciprocate engagement through participation and collaboration. Participants explained that teacher presence mattered deeply, noting that visible investment from teachers encouraged them to lean in, collaborate, and stay connected to the learning.

In contrast to the first four themes, the fifth theme captures participants' experiences with disengagement when teachers enforced expectations without the

practice of teacher empathy. Participants described experiences in which teachers held high expectations without relational warmth, leading to feelings of frustration and hopelessness. Participants described these teachers as uncaring and recalled becoming disconnected from learning. In these contexts, participants perceived teachers as unapproachable or apathetic, which they felt hindered their motivation to participate or ask for support. Participants described disengaging by remaining silent, avoiding interaction, or completing work with minimal or no effort.

These experiences echo prior research showing that deficits in the practice of teacher empathy led to an inability in teachers to identify emotions or meet students' learning needs (Aldrup et al., 2022; Nganga et al., 2021). Participants' accounts contrast sharply with warm demander practices described in the four previous themes. Rather than interpret high expectations as caring, participants perceived expectations without empathy as punitive rather than relational. Although many participants recalled navigating these situations and finding support elsewhere, one participant expressed a resigned acceptance of failure, stating that he did not want to be disengaged and felt frustrated with the teacher who ignored his visible disengagement. By highlighting students' experiences with disengagement, this theme emphasizes the practice of teacher empathy as key to sustaining student motivation and engagement. These accounts reinforce previous research that the practice of teacher empathy manifests through warm demanders who refuse to lower standards out of pity, connect with challenging students in ways that motivate and encourage, and support all students to persist and succeed (Hammond, 2014; Meyers et al., 2019; Okonofua et al., 2016; D. D. Ross et al., 2008;

Wink et al., 2021). Participants shared that expectations without empathy undermined their engagement, which created frustration and withdrawal because they perceived that such experiences need not have occurred in that way.

Although this study did not focus on culture, it is worth reiterating Hammond's (2014) research on brain science and culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes that when students view their teachers as allies, they respect and even welcome their right to demand. Hammond argued that this approach is particularly effective for diverse student populations because relational trust allows teachers to be demanding without prompting student disengagement. The findings of this study reinforce the literature by emphasizing the practice of teacher empathy in fostering student engagement.

Collectively, the first four themes revealed the elements that recent high school graduates viewed as key to their engagement: empathetic understanding demonstrated through relational trust and warm demand, along with an empathetic classroom culture characterized by connection, discussion, and collaboration. When these elements were in place, participants described feeling engaged both emotionally and cognitively. This multifaceted conceptualization of engagement aligns with the literature, which presented three distinct types of student engagement: emotional engagement through relational connection, behavioral engagement through active participation, and cognitive engagement through challenging instruction (Harbour et al., 2015; Pedler et al., 2020). Participants reported that empathetic teachers who act as warm demanders can expect positive outcomes for students, including increased motivation and academic success, as a result of students' engagement as learners. Consistent with these findings, Davies et al.

(2018) analyzed 720 articles and found that student achievement was most strongly associated with emotional and cognitive engagement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study was grounded in Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory and Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy. According to Goleman's theory, people with emotional intelligence have the ability to recognize and understand feelings, manage emotions, and successfully motivate themselves and others. Goleman also identified empathy as characteristic of emotional intelligence and a foundational skill for teachers. Goleman's theory supports the findings of this study, as the data showed that recent high school graduates believed it was important for teachers to understand how they were feeling and that they felt supported when teachers helped them manage their academic expectations alongside those feelings. Every participant shared that a teacher's effort to understand their feelings demonstrated compassionate care and led to authentic connections, trusting relationships, and motivation to learn. These findings align with Goleman's theory not only because participants wanted to be understood, but also because they were motivated by teachers with whom they had relational trust.

Long before Goleman (1995) formally articulated his theory, Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy exemplified the practical application of a teacher's emotional intelligence, including empathy, within the context of teaching and learning. According to Kleinfeld's work, warm demanders exhibit teacher empathy through caring for their students, maintaining academic expectations, and effectively managing their classrooms. Kleinfeld identified a combination of two characteristics indicative of

successful teachers: high levels of personal warmth, manifested through observable behaviors, and active demandingness, motivated by an authentic concern for students.

Kleinfeld's (1975) pedagogy supports the findings of this study, as the data indicate that recent high school graduates felt highly engaged as learners when their teachers balanced academic expectations with a personal understanding of their needs and circumstances. Participants shared that these teachers loved what they did, believed in their learners' potential, and helped them achieve more than they thought possible. These findings align with Kleinfeld's pedagogy by highlighting the experiences of recent high school graduates with warm demanders who engaged students through meaningful relationships, positive culture, and supportive accountability.

### **Discussion in Terms of the Research Question**

Collectively, the findings reveal that recent high school graduates experienced the practice of teacher empathy as an intrinsic part of their engagement as learners. In response to the research question, this discussion articulates participants' perspectives of teacher empathy, summarizes their experiences with how teacher empathy engaged them as learners, and highlights the consequences they described when teacher empathy was absent in their classrooms. Participants perceived the practice of teacher empathy through their teachers' compassion, enthusiasm, support, and active involvement. The participants emphasized a clear connection between the relational and instructional components of their learning experiences, explaining that empathetic teachers engaged them in ways that felt both personally meaningful and academically motivating. From the participants'

perspectives, teacher empathy was observable through classroom practices that fostered trust, created connection, balanced expectations, and invited collaboration.

The findings highlighted that when participants felt care, support, and connection through the practice of teacher empathy, they engaged in learning. Participants consistently reported high levels of engagement when teachers practiced empathy through understanding and flexibility while actively involving students and maintaining clear expectations for their achievement. In response to these practices, participants described feeling safe and therefore able to engage in learning, as manifested through their motivation, interest, participation, and achievement. Because of this, engagement was described as a relational process through which the participants' perceptions of the practice of teacher empathy shaped their engagement and ultimate success as learners. Taken together, the findings suggest that the practice of teacher empathy was integral to how students experienced engagement while learning, directly answering the research question and clarifying what meaningful engagement felt like from the participants' perspectives.

The findings also revealed that when participants perceived a deficit in the practice of teacher empathy, they disengaged from learning. While participants described high expectations paired with relational care as motivating, they also reported disengagement when their teachers held to strict expectations without understanding or support. During these experiences, participants expressed feeling unseen, unheard, and even unsafe. These feelings led participants to disengage from their learning as evidenced through their lack of effort, apathy, and academic failure. These findings suggest that

participants experienced the practice of teacher empathy as a safeguard for their engagement. When the practice of teacher empathy was present, demands were viewed as supportive. When the practice of teacher empathy was absent, those same demands were perceived as barriers that led to overwhelm and discouragement. Collectively, the findings indicate that participants experienced engagement as a relational process sustained by the practice of teacher empathy and closely connected to their academic success.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was limited by several factors related to participant selection. The first limitation of this study, as discussed in Chapter 1, was the small sample size. The sample, which included 12 recent high school graduates, may provide a limited representation of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, the participants were selected from an urban school district in a Southern state, which may not reflect the perspectives of students in other regions of the country. Also, the participants all responded to public invitations to participate in the study. The study reflects the perspectives of 12 participants who were willing and available to share their experiences, potentially excluding more diverse perspectives. However, interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, as evidenced by the absence of new codes after the ninth interview. This indicates that the data were sufficient, and the findings can be considered reliable and transferable to other contexts.

Another limitation of this study relates to the timing of the participants' interviews. All participants were recent high school graduates who, at the time of their

interview, were approximately two months removed from their high school experience. Because they were no longer students, they were being asked to reflect on past experiences, which may have introduced recall bias. This short separation from their school experience may have led participants to recall their most memorable experiences with the phenomenon of teacher empathy. Because the participants' responses primarily focused on high school experiences, the findings may be most applicable to high school settings. However, some participants shared experiences from their elementary and middle school years, and these data did not yield additional codes specific to those contexts. The timing of the interviews may also have contributed to a lack of participant response during member checking, which was used to clarify their responses and ensure the credibility of the data. Participants were asked during the interview whether anything needed to be added to their responses. They were also emailed copies of their transcripts to review for accuracy. Only two of the 12 participants responded, and neither provided critical feedback to clarify their statements. However, because data saturation was achieved during the study, the participants' perspectives may have been sufficient and contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

Another limitation relates to a potential improvement to the interview protocol. The semistructured questions were written to prompt participants to reflect on their experiences with teachers and in classrooms. Because most of the data reflected participants' high school experiences, the interview protocol could have been written to intentionally prompt participants to reflect on their experiences with their elementary and middle school teachers. A more targeted interview protocol may have led to a stronger

understanding of the participants' experiences with the practice of teacher empathy across different stages of their educational journey.

Another limitation pertains to positionality and researcher bias. As an administrator in the school district where the participants attended high school, I chose to interview participants after graduation to help ensure my position did not influence their responses. I also practiced reflexivity to safeguard the findings of the study from my own perspectives and beliefs about the practice of teacher empathy.

### **Recommendations**

Recommendations for further research emerged from the study's strengths and limitations, as well as from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. First, future studies need to explore the practice of teacher empathy across a broader range of educational settings. This study focused on the perspectives of recent high school graduates from a public-school setting. Future studies could include graduates of charter, private, or virtual schools. These perspectives may provide a broader understanding of how the practice of teacher empathy and student engagement are perceived across different educational settings. Similar studies may serve to determine how the approaches of other educational settings influence the practice of teacher empathy with student engagement.

Another recommendation is to explore the practice of teacher empathy using a different research design. Based on the recommendations of other researchers, I considered conducting a quantitative study. Other studies have used quantitative methods to test the relationship between the practice of teacher empathy and positive student outcomes. However, no quantitative study has tested the relationship between the practice

of teacher empathy and student engagement. I also considered implementing a different qualitative research design. Future qualitative researchers might consider a case study. This approach would allow a researcher to use an observational approach to investigate the phenomenon of teacher empathy within the context of a classroom. Additionally, I believe a mixed-methods design could yield valuable data for the field. Quantitative data, including achievement records, could expand the field's understanding of the influence of teacher empathy on student success. Past researchers have focused on teachers' self-assessments of their empathy (Aldrup et al., 2022; Jederlund & von Rosen, 2023; Ottenheim-Vliegen et al., 2023; J. Ross et al., 2023). Other helping fields have shown misalignment between professionals' self-assessments of empathy and their clients' assessments (Bernardo et al., 2018). Future researchers could conduct surveys to investigate the discrepancies between self-evaluations of the practice of teacher empathy and students' evaluations of the practice of teacher empathy. Follow-up interviews with both teachers and students could add depth to the data by exploring the reasons for the discrepancies. This research could provide the field with a comprehensive understanding of the practice of teacher empathy by identifying how teachers employ it and how students perceive it.

Future researchers could also conduct longitudinal research to observe the perspectives of students over time. One of the limitations of this study was that the interview protocol naturally led participants to recall high school experiences. Because this study was dependent on the participants' retrospective accounts of their experiences with the practice of teacher empathy, future researchers may consider interviewing

students at various times throughout their educational experience to understand shifts that may occur between elementary, middle, and high school. Also, this research could help address ongoing concerns in the field regarding declining student engagement (Hodges, 2018).

Another consideration for future studies is to include demographics of the participants to consider whether cultural elements influence students' perspectives of the practice of teacher empathy. Although this study was based on Kleinfeld's (1975) concept of warm demander pedagogy, which stems from a teacher's cultural responsiveness to their students, my framework was more broadly based on emotional intelligence and the practice of teacher empathy rather than cultural identity. However, this study sought to elevate student perspectives through the voices of recent high school graduates due to the ongoing efforts within the field of education to engage diverse learners better (Aldrup et al., 2022; Banks & Smyth, 2021; Okonofua et al., 2016; Vomund & Miller, 2024; Warren, 2018). Future research may focus more closely on teacher–student dynamics and perspectives of the practice of teacher empathy when warm demander pedagogy is applied to diverse classroom settings.

One participant discussed a perceived imbalance in a teacher's warmth and demand throughout the school year. This nuanced perspective warrants further exploration. Given the qualitative nature of this study, statistical analyses were not conducted. The participant explained that the teacher shifted from being 80% warm and 20% demanding throughout most of the year to being 20% warm and 80% demanding during testing season. This change created additional stress for the participant. It led to

feelings of frustration, suggesting that fluctuating emotions in a teacher may lead to a decline in both the teacher–student relationship and the students’ emotional engagement. Future research may wish to investigate this dynamic further by examining the spectrum of warmth and demand. This study focused on warm teachers, demanding teachers, and warm demanders, those who were considered to balance warmth and demand. However, this equilibrium was not explicitly stated, and further research could investigate how warmth and demand may vary across times of the academic year or other specific contexts.

Lastly, future studies could explore the impact of professional learning opportunities that enhance teachers’ understanding of their own emotional intelligence and empathy on their ability to implement warm demander practices. Prior research showed that micro sessions on the practice of teacher empathy reduced punitive disciplinary measures and halved suspension rates (Okonofua et al., 2016). Experimental designs may offer insight into the possible influence of teachers’ empathy-based professional learning on their students’ engagement.

### **Implications**

This study brought to the literature the perspectives of recent high school graduates on the phenomenon of teacher empathy and supports previous studies, which have shown that the practice of teacher empathy is an effective approach to engage learners (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024). The findings from this study reveal that recent high school graduates perceived the practice of teacher empathy through relational connection, classroom culture, high expectations, discussion,

and support. One implication for positive social change is that this research provides insight into students' needs, as reflected in the public-school experiences of recent high school graduates. This insight may lead teachers to change their attitudes and beliefs about the practice of teacher empathy as an effective way to influence student engagement. As a result, both teachers and students may benefit from more engaging classrooms characterized by relational trust, connected culture, and academic achievement.

This study also has the potential to impact social change within schools and districts. The findings from this study could shape professional learning programs and guide instructional practices. Schools may benefit from integrating empathy-focused strategies into professional learning requirements. This support could help teachers increase their emotional intelligence and implement warm demander pedagogy. After teachers have been provided training, school administrators could incorporate empathy-based indicators into their classroom observation tools. Also, mentor teachers and instructional specialists could provide empathy training to support novice teachers. These steps may transform classroom culture, ultimately leading to schools and districts that are known for students who feel known, connected, and engaged.

This study also has the potential to impact social change through policy related to teacher evaluation. The findings support the value of explicitly integrating the practice of teacher empathy into evaluation frameworks. As an administrator, I noticed connections between the study's findings and Danielson's (2007) framework for teaching. For example, the first key finding identified learner engagement through relational trust with

compassionate teachers. Danielson's framework identifies indicators for teachers to demonstrate effective planning and preparation by demonstrating knowledge of their students, including their needs, skills, and interests. The Danielson Group (2012) highlights the importance of a teacher's ability to adjust instruction based on their students' contexts, along with their academic, social, and emotional needs. The second key finding related to learner engagement through connected classrooms led by enthusiastic teachers. Danielson's framework provides an entire domain focused on the classroom environment with indicators for teachers to create an environment of respect and rapport by managing the interactions and ensuring respectful connections. The framework also supports the study's third finding, which highlighted learner engagement through a balanced combination of warm support and high expectations. Danielson's description of an effective learning culture included learning expectations, student pride in work, and the importance of content. Effective classroom environments are marked by excitement about the importance of learning and the ability of students to succeed in learning (Danielson Group, 2012). The fourth key finding described engagement as a result of classroom discussion and collaborative learning opportunities. Danielson's framework also supports this finding through indicators that guide effective instruction through discussion techniques and engaging group work and activities. The final key finding clarified that students' disengagement may follow when teachers' demands are not preceded by care. Danielson emphasized that effective instruction includes feedback coupled with flexibility through adjustment, responsiveness, and persistence. Although the practice of teacher empathy is not explicitly referenced in Danielson's framework, its

importance is reflected in The Danielson Group's explanation of excellent teaching: "When students remember their favorite teachers years later ... they recall the empathy and caring teachers demonstrated, their high expectations for achievement, and their commitment to students' well-being." If educators clearly shifted to emphasize teacher empathy as a competency, it could lead to promising policy changes that support compassionate teaching practices and engage learners.

The findings from this study carry methodological implications by highlighting the value of interviewing recent high school graduates. The population and semistructured interview protocol used in this study enabled participants to reflect authentically, without the vulnerability of being under the supervision of their high school and with the benefit of hindsight. This nuanced perspective allowed graduates to reflect on their entire educational experience, recalling contextual details while also stepping back to see the big picture. Although reproducing this design in future studies may be precarious, as it limits researchers to securing IRB approval in close proximity to high school graduation, this temporal constraint enabled the study to gather recent, detailed, retrospective accounts of student experiences with the practice of teacher empathy. Future research could use this approach to provide quasi-longitudinal data without the demands of a lengthy longitudinal study.

The study's findings also carry theoretical and empirical implications. The research was grounded in a conceptual framework that uniquely combined emotional intelligence theory with the concept of warm demander pedagogy. This framework expanded previous research on warm demander pedagogy by highlighting the influence it

has on student engagement regardless of race or culture. This approach suggests a more holistic understanding of effective teaching by focusing on what a teacher can develop—the skills associated with emotional intelligence and the strategies of warm demander pedagogy. Empirically, the study shows that recent high school graduates benefited from these approaches and viewed teacher empathy as key to their engagement, which carries implications for practice. The findings revealed that participants viewed the practices of emotionally intelligent teachers, including building relationships with students and creating connected classroom cultures, as worthwhile investments of their time. Although the challenges of diverse classrooms and vulnerable student populations continue to affect educators (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019; Vomund & Miller, 2024), this study implies that emotionally intelligent teachers who use warm demander pedagogy are perceived as better able to meet the learning needs of all students.

Although the study did not include teachers' perspectives, the literature highlighted the personal benefits associated with the practice of teacher empathy (Araya & Martin, 2022). Therefore, the study has widespread practical implications for future professional development, suggesting the importance of focusing on the empathetic skills associated with warm demander pedagogy and emotional intelligence. Collectively, the implications of this study, along with previous research, suggest the overwhelmingly positive results from the practice of teacher empathy, including two key outcomes: reduced teacher stress and increased student engagement.

## Conclusion

The data from this study revealed, through the perspectives and experiences of recent high school graduates, that the practice of teacher empathy is key to engaging learners. The introduction to this study defined teacher empathy as a teacher's ability to understand their students, respond with care and concern, and work toward positive outcomes. Participants reported that when teachers expressed empathy, they felt understood and cared for, which in turn fostered reciprocal care and engagement. Because the purpose of this study was to elevate the perspectives of students through the voices of recent high school graduates, I will conclude the study with the powerful recommendation voiced by one participant about caring teachers he recalled as life-changing:

Any teacher I've ever had that genuinely cared, not only about what they were teaching, but about their students - it makes a wild difference. Some of the best teachers I've ever had ... genuinely cared about how I was doing. And I can name them. I vividly remember those teachers. They were special to me. So, I think the bottom line of what a good teacher's doing is that they care, whether it's about the student or about what they're teaching, just to care.

This appeal to educators emphasizes that the practice of teacher empathy is far more than a personal disposition; it is an essential professional skill at the heart of effective teaching. Participants in this study shared strikingly similar experiences, identifying the practice of teacher empathy as a powerful catalyst for student engagement. Only weeks after tossing their graduation caps in the air, participants

reflected on their educational journeys and affirmed that students' lives can be meaningfully shaped by teachers who see them, challenge them, and support them. By elevating the perspectives of recent high school graduates, these findings confirm that closing the gap in the practice of teacher empathy is essential for fostering student engagement. Situated at the convergence of relational warmth and high expectations, the practice of teacher empathy shapes dynamic learning spaces where students show up, engage, and learn.

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## Appendix A: Brief Survey

The purpose of this survey is to determine your interest in participating in a research study that will explore recent high school graduates' perspectives of the practice of teacher empathy as an approach to engage learners. Your responses will be kept confidential and only be used to assess your ability to participate. This study will benefit the field of education by providing recent high school graduates' perspectives on this topic. The information that you provide on this survey will be kept confidential. If you are selected to participate, your identity and responses will be kept strictly anonymous.

\*Indicates required question

Please read the criteria below. \*

BOTH boxes must be checked to confirm your eligibility to participate in the study:

- I will graduate from high school at the end of the 2024-2025 school year.
- I am 18+ years old and therefore able to provide my own consent to participate in a study.

NAME - What is your full name? \*

PHONE NUMBER - Please provide a phone number through which you can be contacted via text or call. \*

EMAIL ADDRESS - Please provide a personal email address that you check regularly and through which you can be contacted. \*

Consider your typical weekly schedule. What is your availability to participate in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour?

Check ALL that apply for each day. \*

	I have no availability.	Morning (Beginning time from 8 am - 11 am)	Afternoon (Beginning time from Noon - 4 pm)	Evening (Beginning time from 5 pm - 7 pm)
Sunday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tuesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wednesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thursday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Saturday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participants will be selected on a first come first served basis.

If you have any questions regarding your participation or the study, you may email the researcher at [susanna.post@waldenu.edu](mailto:susanna.post@waldenu.edu).

Thank you for your interest in participating.

You may submit your response.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol will consist of me introducing myself to the participant, thanking them for their participation, and reviewing the purpose of the study. I will offer each participant the following reminders: they are under no obligation to participate, they may cease participation if they feel uncomfortable at any time, there will be no consequences if they cease participation, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, documentation will be kept securely, and their identity and the identities of the teachers they reference will remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. I will provide the participant a copy of their informed consent and a copy of the interview questions for their reference. Before beginning the interview questions, I will ask each participant if they have any questions for me. To help the participant feel comfortable and to build rapport, I will begin by asking them the introduction questions. Participants will tell me about themselves and what they enjoy doing. The interview will include a series of open-ended questions that were written to elicit rich responses from the participants. The questions were written to reduce researcher bias and will enable me to explore the participant's perspectives and experiences with the complex phenomenon of teacher empathy and how it has been used as an approach to engage learners. To conclude the interview, I will ask participants if there is anything else they would like to share that could help future readers. Finally, I will thank the participants for their contribution.

## Interview Questions

### Introduction/Rapport

1. Tell me about yourself. What do you enjoy doing? (What did you enjoy doing inside/outside of school?)
2. Tell me about your school journey. What did you enjoy the most along the way? What was the most challenging? (You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_; could you tell me more about that?)

### Teacher–Student Relationships

3. Think about a teacher with whom you felt connected. When did you have this teacher and what was it like to be in their classroom? (What did the teacher do/say that made you feel connected to them?)
4. What is a good student–teacher relationship? (How do good student–teacher relationships affect students?)
5. Describe specific things teachers have done or said that impacted your relationship with them. (How did that make you feel about learning in their class?)

### Emotional Intelligence

6. In your opinion, is it important for teachers to understand how students are feeling? Can you explain more about why you think that?
7. Can you tell me about a time when a teacher seemed to understand how you were feeling? How did the teacher respond to how you were feeling? (What specific things did the teacher do or say because they knew how you felt?)

**Engagement**

8. What does an engaging classroom look and sound like? (What specific things help make a classroom engaging?)
9. What does an engaging teacher look and sound like? (What specific things could a teacher do or say to be engaging?)
10. Think about times when you have been the most engaged in learning. How did teachers motivate you to be highly engaged in classes? (Can you give an example of how this helped you or others?)

**Warm Demanders**

11. Think of a teacher who could be described as warm, someone who made you feel supported. What did they do or say to make you feel like they cared? (How did they affect the way you felt/behaved/learned in their class?)
12. Think of a teacher who could be described as demanding, someone who expected a lot from you. What did they do or say to express their high expectations? (How did they affect the way you felt/behaved/learned in their class?)
13. Can you think of a teacher who could be described as both warm and demanding? How did that teacher earn your respect or effort? (How did they affect the way you felt/behaved/learned in their class?)
14. Try to recall a time when you felt misunderstood by a teacher. What did they do or say to make you feel misunderstood? (How did feeling misunderstood by your teacher impact you in their class?)

15. Try to recall a time when you felt understood by a teacher. What did they do or say to make you feel understood? (How did feeling understood by your teacher impact you in their class?)

16. What are some things teachers can do to better understand and respond to their students? (If a teacher did what you suggested, how do you think it would change things?)

17. I have one final question for you. Since teachers and others may read this study to better understand students' perspectives, would you like to share anything else that you think is important for them to know and understand? (Based on your school experiences, is there anything you wish teachers knew that could ultimately help students be more successful?)