



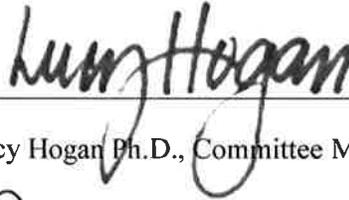
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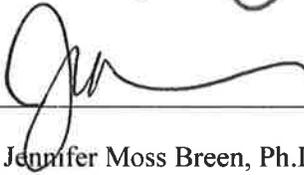
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QUANTIFYING NEW TEACHER RELATIONAL COMPETENCE  
WITH AT-RISK ADOLESCENTS

By

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE PROPOSAL

Creighton University

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**Abstract**

Positive teacher-student relationships can have long-lasting beneficial social, academic, and mental health effects on a child's human development. Many teachers see relations and interactions with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession. Many Western nations are experiencing difficulties attracting new teachers and retaining them once they are in the profession. By incorporating the teaching of relational competences to new teachers in Denmark, new teachers have seen an increase in recognizing the pre-challenges and pre-conditions that students bring with them into the classroom. Further research is needed to determine if new teachers within the United States believe they have the relational competences needed to develop relationships with students from poverty as they interact in a dynamic ecological system.

*Keywords:* Ecological Systems Theory, relational competences, new teachers, attrition, at-risk adolescents

## CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE PROBLEM

**Introduction and Background**

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977) landmark study described the importance of external influences (systems) that affect the capacity of families to foster the healthy development of their children. Bronfenbrenner (1977) argued:

The understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place; it requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject. (p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST) discussed how important interactions within each system (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) aid in the development of a child. The microsystem of students encompasses the relationships and interactions each child has with their surroundings (Berk, 2000). The mesosystem provides the connections between the structure of a child's microsystem (Berk, 2000). As teachers spend a large amount of time within the mesosystem of their students, those that work with adolescents play a crucial role in their overall cognitive and social development.

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by suboptimal decisions and actions that are associated with an increased incidence of unintentional injuries, violence, substance abuse, unintended pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008). During this period, the social environment is changing such that more time is spent with peers versus adults, and more conflicts arise between the adolescent

and his/her parents (Csikszentmihalyi, Larson, & Prescott, 1977; Steinberg 1989). As evidenced by the National Center for Health Statistics on adolescent behavior and mortality, suboptimal choices and actions observed during adolescence represent a nonlinear change in behavior, distinct from childhood and adulthood (Casey et al., 2008). As more and more research on the adolescent brain emerges, science has found that brain development plays a major role in the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents. Jensen and Nutt (2014) discussed how the adolescent brain is not that of a little adult, but is plastic, as in malleable, and is searching to make connections that help the brain develop and change throughout this period. Jensen and Nutt (2014) also described how adolescents are trying to make sense of their world, and are very observational. Even when adolescents appear to not be paying attention to adults, they really are (Jensen & Nutt, 2014). Rosner (2007) stated that the given gap between the numbers of teenagers in need of services and the paucity of mental health personnel trained to address that need, it will be necessary to encourage professionals to obtain knowledge and skills required to work effectively with youth. Previous research suggests that non-parental mentors can also provide warmth, support, and guidance to youth (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Larson, 2011).

Social and emotional competences (SEC) have often been an umbrella term for a wide range of competences, from emotional intelligence to cognitive regulation (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Relational competence, also referred to as interpersonal competence, can be placed into this general framework of teachers' SEC (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). Teachers see relations and interactions with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does

not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession (Jensen et al., 2015). The Norwegian Ministry of Education in 2008 concluded that the competence to establish and maintain good teacher–student relationships is a central and important one for a teacher in today’s schools (Jensen, Skibsted, & Christensen, 2015). This conclusion was the launching point for a current study looking at the Bachelor Degree Program for Teacher Education in Aarhus, Denmark, investigating the development of relational competence in both theory and practice. The project’s overall aim was to break new ground in pedagogical research and teacher education, and the goal was to contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge within this academic field, so that relational competence can be understood and taught as part of ongoing development of a teacher’s professional competence (Jensen et al., 2015). Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen (2015) also stated in regard to teacher education programs and relationship building:

They have therefore been understood as and ascribed to aspects of the individual teacher’s personality rather than as competencies to be developed. One consequence of this is that many teachers have been left to work with these factors by themselves; it is as if there might be a taboo involved in dealing with person related factors in teaching.

(p. 204)

As many teachers may have had different developmental experiences than the students that they will be asked to teach, a focus on the relational competence of today’s students and teachers may be an area of concern. “The area of interpersonal relations and pedagogy is still primarily embedded in the individual teacher’s private experience and values, which places limitations on the quality and scope of the work with relational competences in schools” (Jensen et al., 2015, p. 204). It is imperative that research

should be conducted to see how well-prepared teachers feel in their assessment to build positive teacher-student relationships with a wide variety of children, coming from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

### **Problem Statement**

Many teachers see relations and interaction with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession (Jensen et al., 2015). A positive teacher-student relationship helps children build connectedness (value and a sense of belonging) (Goodenow, 1993), enhanced well-being, self-esteem, and self-worth (Frydenberg, Care, Chan, & Freeman, 2009), higher academic performance and improved school behavior (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The Department of Education (2017) stated that 48 states and The District of Columbia all reported having teacher shortages. These teacher shortages lead to emergency certifications, which could have individuals teaching children with very little professional educator training. Teacher educational enrollments nationwide have also dropped 35% between the years of 2009-2014 (Ostroff, 2017). Rinke (2007) regards new teacher attrition as a “silent crisis” (p. 3). While there is some disagreement about the actual percentage of teachers who leave teaching in their first five years (from 5% to 50%), “one very stable finding is that attrition is high for young teachers” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p. 10). Feistritz (2011) stated that the largest percentage of teachers (29%) is newer to the profession (0-5 years of experience). Cornu (2013) described how new teachers are both sustained by and drained by the relationships they developed with their students. With almost a third of all teachers in the early stages of

the profession, it is important to understand how prepared these teachers are in relational competences, which may aid in the retention of these newer educational professionals.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine quantitatively how U. S. educators, new to the profession, value their self-assessment towards Relational Competence (RC) and the building of positive relationships with at-risk adolescent students in high poverty schools. *Relational Competence* is defined as teacher's ability to see a student as a unique being and to consequently adapt their own actions (behavior) without abandoning the leadership role and their authenticity, as well taking full responsibility for teacher-student relationship (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). RC is also referred to as interpersonal competence and can be placed in the general framework of teachers' social-emotional competences (SEC).

While a large and growing body of research on both classroom management and general and subject-specific teaching competency are available for teachers and teacher educators, the same cannot be said about relational competence (Jensen et al., 2015). Currently, scientific evidence is scarce in the RC of teachers and the measurement of teachers' RC is necessary to advance the science and research in the field of teachers' SEC (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016).

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

The knowledge gaps in research lead to knowledge gaps for practitioners. Pedagogical research and the teacher education programs have previously underestimated the significance of the more person-centered values, such as relations, respect and empathy, in teaching practice probably because these elements are perceived to be natural and obvious elements of professional teaching (Jensen et al., 2015). Through the use of quantitative analysis, relational competences of new teachers (0-5 years of experience)

were measured and analyzed using the Teachers' Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) developed by Vidmar and Kerman (2016).

### **Research Question**

### **Hypothesis**

- *New teachers will report a low self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences working with at-risk adolescents.*
- *New teachers with a high self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences will desire to continue in the profession.*

### **Sub-Questions**

- To what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents?
- What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty?
- To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to future teacher attrition rates?

### **Aim**

The aim of this study is to inform teacher preparation programs, trainers, and providers of educational professional development in the assessment levels of teacher relational competences. If educators' assessment in the area of relational competences appears to be low, it might be necessary to change teacher preparation and professional development methodology to aid in the pedagogical acquisition of positive teacher-student relationship building.

### **Proposed Methodology**

The proposed methodology of this study was to obtain survey data from new teachers (0-5 years of experience) who work with at-risk adolescents using the Teachers' Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) developed by Vidmar and Kerman (2016). This data will then be subjected to an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Correlation statistical tests, using SPSS to quantify the RC of new teachers' self-assessment.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

Throughout this proposal terms are used to describe subject-specific and technical terms.

The following terms were used operationally within this study.

*Free and Reduced Meals (FARM):* A category in which students are classified based on family income, students in this category are usually considered to be living in poverty.

*Adolescents:* Any person between the ages of 10-19.

*At-risk:* Students categorized as FARMs.

*Social and Emotional Competence (SEC):* An individual's self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Schonert-Reichel, Hanson-Peterson, & Hymel, 2015).

*Relational Competence (RC):* The teacher's ability to see a student as a unique being and to consequently adapt their own actions (behavior) without abandoning the leadership role and their authenticity, as well taking full responsibility for teacher-student relationship. Also referred to as interpersonal competence and can be placed in the general framework of social and emotional competence (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016).

*New Teacher:* An educational professional who has 0-5 years of experience.

*Self-assessment:* Teachers' beliefs in their capabilities to produce an effect.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Personal Biases**

The methodology of this study attempted to quantify teacher relational competences of educational professionals who work with at-risk adolescents, but many limitations and delimitations were recognized. A few examples of limitations that occurred were the number of participants that returned the survey and the time of year in which this study may took place. A limitation also may occur as this is a self-reported measure, which may differ from the perspectives of others. The TRCS survey also possessed a limitation as it was introduced in 2016 and has only been used with teachers in Slovenia schools. Another limiting factor was the term "at-risk", as in the profession of education "at-risk" has many definitions and is a wild-card term for a multitude of struggles that a child may face in their life; inside and outside of the school.

A delimitating factor was the geographical restrictions of the proposed sample. As this study attempted to look at relational competencies of new teachers who come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, it is reasonable to expect that quantitative analysis might not be applicable to all new teachers as a whole.

Bias may be inherent in this study, as I have been a middle school teacher who has worked with adolescents for over a decade. Based on my professional and personal experiences of working with educational professionals whom have expressed concerns on how they cannot relate to certain groups of individuals, especially many at-risk adolescents, I have chosen to quantitatively analyze anonymous survey data to reduce this potential for bias.

### **The Role of Leadership in this Study**

Creighton University prides itself on being a Jesuit institution that pursues justice and possess concern for individuals considered poor and marginalized. As I pursue a doctoral degree in Interdisciplinary Leadership, this proposed study is the first step in trying to be an agent of transformational change in educational preparation for teachers of a vulnerable population of children. As Jesuits have also put a premium on the value of an education, this study will also seek to explore one of the reasons why so many teachers leave the profession within the first five years of their professional careers.

Burns (2003) stated that transformational leaders focus on terminal values such as liberty, equality and justice. These values mobilize and energize followers, create an agenda for action, and appeal to larger audiences. A transformational leader encourages followers to look beyond self-interests and to the common good, while using persuasive appeals based on reason (Johnson, 2015). Through this proposed study, I hope to determine if relational competence in new teachers is a “reason” to begin a transformational teacher preparation program to support the common good.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there appeared to be a lack of research in the area of relational competences in the field of education, especially teacher training, as it has possibly just been considered a natural part of the profession. As society changes over time, the ecological systems of teachers and students have also changed, and challenges of the present are not necessarily those of the past. The Department of Education (2017) stated that 48 states and The District of Columbia all reported having teacher shortages. These teacher shortages lead to emergency certifications, which could have individuals teaching

children with very little professional educator training. Teacher educational enrollments nationwide have also dropped 35% between the years of 2009-2014 (Ostroff, 2017).

Therefore, a quantitative study should be done to describe if new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel prepared in relational competences that are essential in building positive teacher-student relationships in today's classrooms. If the hypothesis is supported, a shift in teacher educational programs could aid in the possible recruitment and retention of educators, especially in areas where there is a large population of at-risk adolescents.

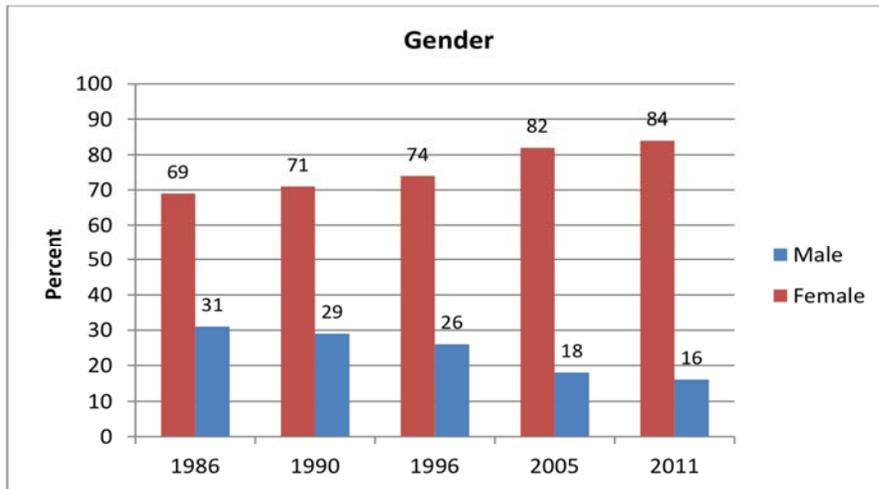
## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Urie Bronfenbrenner authored, co-authored, or was the editor of more than 300 articles and chapters and 14 books on the field he created, human ecological development (Bendtro, 2006). Outside of his profession, he is best known as cofounder of the Head Start program which has touched millions of children in poverty (Bendtro, 2006). Bronfenbrenner believed that every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her, and without a secure caring bond, children cannot thrive and reach their full potential. He also believed that positive youth development requires caring and supportive teachers (Bendtro, 2006). Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST) discussed how important interactions within each system (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) aid in the development of a child. The interactions between teacher and student are not isolated, but are a reciprocal transaction. The transaction not only can impact the student, but the student also can have an effect on the teacher's behavior (Bendtro, 2006). The following literature review will first present the current state of the teaching profession and the challenges that United States public K-12 schools have in the recruitment and retainment of new teachers to the profession. The next component of this literature review will discuss the role teachers play in the lives of "at-risk" adolescents and describe many of the struggles that teachers and students face in the relationship building process. Finally, this literature review will provide an analysis of teacher preparation, specifically focusing on the development or lack thereof relational competences dealing with adolescents who live in poverty. Throughout this literature review Bronfenbrenner's EST will be discussed as his life's work has guided the theoretical framework of this proposed study.

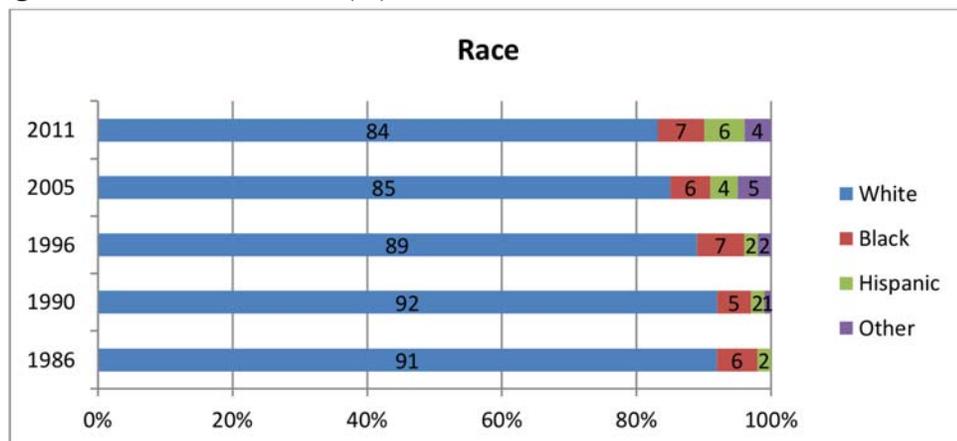
**Current State of US K-12 Educational Organizations**

The Department of Education (2017) stated that 48 states and The District of Columbia all reported having teacher shortages. Teacher educational enrollments nationwide have also dropped 35% between the years of 2009-2014 (Ostroff, 2017). The most recent data provided by the United States Department of Education (2014) stated that 76.3 percent of public school teachers in the U.S. are female and 81.9 percent of teachers identified themselves as White. These demographics are important to understand how classrooms have changed over time and what 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom teachers look like, while comparing them to the students they are being asked to teach (see Figure 1 & 2) (Feistritzer, 2011).

*Figure 1. Gender of Teachers (%)*



*Figure 2. Race of Teachers (%)*



For the first time in at least fifty years a majority of U.S. public K-12 school students come from low-income families (Layton, 2015). One way that school systems measure the amount of low-income families is through student participation in Free and Reduced Meals (FARMs) programs. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2017) categorizes poverty based on the percentage of students eligible for meal price reduction: *high-poverty* public schools are 75.0+ percent, *mid-high* 50.1-75.0, *mid-low* 25.1-50.0, and *low* poverty when 25.0 percent or less of students are eligible for meal price reductions. In the 2014-15 school year, nearly half of Hispanic and Black public-school students attended high poverty schools, while in contrast 8 percent of White students attended high-poverty schools (NCES, 2017).

Although this study will use poverty as a measure of being “at-risk”, I believe Bronfenbrenner would also classify students’ lacking parental support or the guidance of at least a primary and a secondary caring adult “at-risk” as well (Bendtro, 2006). The Pew Research Center (PRC) (2015) determined that children coming from two parent families has decreased by 25 percent since 1960. The PRC (2015) also found that one parent households has increased by 17 percent over the same time period. As family dynamics, student demographics, and poverty have changed in U.S. public schools, the lived experiences of today’s students could potentially differ dramatically compared to the lived experiences of today’s current teachers. Bronfenbrenner (1977) defined the ecology of human development as:

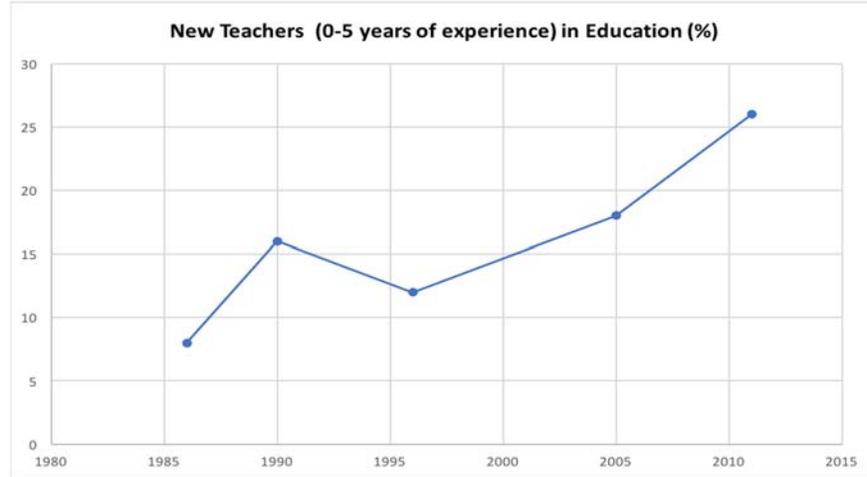
The scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these

immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described that humans develop based on their immediate settings and environment, but also the larger social contexts in which they experience throughout their lives. The lives of today's student and the social contexts in which they experience interactions in the U.S. could be very different than what their teacher experienced.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) microsystem would be considered the immediate setting in which a human organism finds itself, but the mesosystem comprises the interrelations among these major settings. Bronfenbrenner (1977) stated, "Thus, for an American 12-year-old, the mesosystem encompasses interactions among family, school, and peer group" (p. 515). Many teachers see relations and interaction with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession (Jensen et al., 2015). The difficulties of interacting between teacher and student could possibly be adding to the attrition rate of teachers, thus propagating teacher shortages and lower teacher educational enrollments. These teacher shortages can lead to emergency certifications, which could have individuals teaching children with very little professional educator training. The most recent data (as shown in Figure 3) stated that new teachers (0-5 years of experience) now make up the largest percentage (26%) of those in the profession (Feistritzer, 2011).

*Figure 3. New Teachers (0-5 years of experience) in Education (%)*



Teacher retention and attrition appears to be at the forefront of many educational organizations. While there is some disagreement about the actual percentage of teachers who leave teaching in their first five years (from 5% to 50%), “one very stable finding is that attrition is high for young teachers” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p. 10).

In conclusion, the majority of teachers within the U.S. are female and White. Although age appears to range, the majority of teachers in this country are fifty years of age or older (Golding, Taie, & Riddles, 2014), with the average being 42 years of age (NCES, 2017). As the student population becomes more diverse, while also possibly growing up in a much different environment than their current teachers, it is imperative that educational professionals have a firm understanding of the lived experiences of today’s U.S. adolescents.

### **At-Risk Adolescents**

King et. al. (2005) stated, “Adolescence, and arguably early adolescence in particular, is a period of pronounced and often dramatic changes involving all the individual’s biological, psychological, behavioral, and social functioning” (p. 95). These

alterations make this period a time of vulnerability and adjustment (Steinberg, 2005). Since at least the scientific launching of the study of adolescence (Hall, 1904), these changes have been seen through the lens of a deficit model. That is, there has existed a conception depicting the prototypic adolescent period as a time of storm and stress, of normative developmental disturbance (Freud, 1969), or of crisis and conflict (Erikson, 1968). A 21<sup>st</sup> century view on adolescent development has emerged and it focuses on the plasticity of individual behaviors across ontogeny and hence the potential for promoting positive change across the life course (Lerner, 2002; Lerner & Steinberg, 2004).

An adolescent is considered a young person who is developing into an adult. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that age is a convenient way to define adolescents, but that mostly pertains to the assessing and comparing of biological changes. The biological changes, that occur during puberty are fairly universal, but social transition can vary depending on the socio-cultural environment in which the child develops (“Adolescent development,” 2017). This study is classifying adolescents as students who range between the ages of 10-19 and found traditionally in the grades 6-12 in U.S. public schools.

An influential theory of social justice argues that maximizing the well-being of the worst off should guide the equitable distribution of socioeconomic resources (Rawls, 2009). In early 2011 there were 1.5 million households with roughly 3 million U.S. children surviving on cash income of no more than \$2.00 per person, per day in any given month (Edin & Shaefer, 2015). Although there are very few studies that follow individuals from childhood through midlife, Savolainen, Mason, Lyyra, Pulkkinen, and Kokko (2017) tracked a cohort of Finnish born students since 1959. Savolainen et al.

(2017) stated, “continuity in antisocial behavior from childhood to mature adulthood contributes to socioeconomic exclusion both independently of the human capital pathway and through its negative impact on adolescent educational attainment” (p. 1606). Mason et al. (2017) observed that adolescent educational failure operates as a life course “snare” with the potential to direct individuals toward a criminal lifestyle. Richard Rosner (2007) was the founding president of the Accreditation Council on Fellowships in Adolescent Psychiatry (ACFAP) and stated, “Saving adolescents is not easy” (p. 44). Rosner (2007) stated that the given gap between the numbers of teenagers in need of services and the paucity of mental health personnel trained to address that need, it will be necessary to encourage professionals to obtain knowledge and skills required to work effectively with youth.

While adults often look for prescriptions and concrete steps that might lead to positive development or improve resilience in youth, finding such a broad-based formula often masks the unique contribution of each individual and distinct group of youth (Spencer & Spencer, 2014). Bronfenbrenner (1977) tried to describe the distinctive situations in which every human being develops and constructs them as unique, but those that share similar experiences might possess similar outlooks on the world. A recent study compared the differences between homeless and 4-H adolescents in the areas of happiness, family support, identity, personal strengths, and risk avoidance. The study’s juxtaposition of two diverse samples of adolescents found substantial differences between the way homeless and 4-H adolescents conceptualized happiness, family support, personal strengths, pressure to do well, and risk avoidance (Nott & Vuchinich, 2016). Nott and Vuchinich (2016) found that homeless youth sought out other supportive

relationships, especially with teachers and adjusted their views of happiness based on their situations. In this study, homeless youth frequently revealed feeling unsupported or inconsistently supported by their parents. Although negativity often surrounded the discussions about parents for shelter youth, they frequently affirmed siblings, other adults, and pets as supportive (Nott & Vuchinich, 2016). In contrast, the majority of 4-H youth described their parents as supportive and attributed their ambition to caring parents, not necessarily their teachers (Nott & Vuchinich, 2016). Previous research suggests that non-parental mentors can also provide warmth, support, and guidance to youth (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Larson, 2011).

In conclusion, adolescents throughout history have been looked upon differently, and a larger amount of information on adolescent brain development has emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adolescents has recently been recognized as a unique stage of physical, social, and cognitive development that is rife with risky behaviors and increased emotional reactivity (Casey et al., 2008). Social justice theory as described by Rawls (2009), contended that maximizing the well-being of the worst off should guide the equitable distribution of socioeconomic resources. As these individuals are going through what many consider a very difficult stage in which they are ill-prepared to handle these intense physiological and biological changes, a concerted effort to better understand this developmental process should be considered by educational professionals and those that work with this population. Recent studies (Dubois & Karcher, 2005; Larson, 2011; Nott & Vuchinic) have demonstrated teachers can directly impact the lives of adolescents, especially those classified at-risk and in poverty. Through the use of

mentoring and relationship building, educational professionals can promote positive change across the life course of the students they serve.

### **Relational Competence Preparation**

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory (EST) discussed how important interactions within each system (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) aid in the development of a child. The microsystem of students encompasses the relationships and interactions each child has with their surroundings (Berk, 2000). The mesosystem provides the connections between the structure of the child's microsystem (Berk, 2000). Bronfenbrenner (1977) believed that a mesosystem is a system of microsystems, therefore teachers possess an ability to perform ecological experimentation. Bronfenbrenner (1977) stated that the main effects of ecological research are likely to be interactions and environmental structures and processes taking place within and between these interactions and must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed in systems terms. The interactions between teacher and student are not isolated, but are a reciprocal transaction. The transaction not only can impact the student, but the student also can have an effect on the teacher's behavior (Bendtro, 2006). As teachers spend a large amount of time within the mesosystem of their students, those that work with adolescents play a crucial role in their overall cognitive and social development.

Relational competence theory (RCT) focuses on how effectively we deal with each other. L'Abate, Cusinato, Maino, Colesso, and Scilleta (2010) described *Relational* as a "bidirectional rather unidirectional interactions with intimates and nonintimates in a continuous interdependent and reciprocal exchange of resources available to us" (p. vii). L'Abate et al. (2010) also referred to *Effectiveness* as "how we feel, how we think, how

we act, how we are aware, and how we evaluate proximal and distant subjective contexts as perceived by us” (p. vii). *Theory* as described by L’Abate et al. (2010) means:

A hierarchical framework akin to the table of organization of any human enterprise with various levels expanding downward from generality to specificity and from abstract to concrete, going from overall general assumptions, theory-specific assumptions, normative models proper, models clinically relevant to dysfunctional conditions, to the improvement of competence. (p. vii)

The role of relational competence has been studied in many fields, such as health care (Ford et al., 2014; Pauget & Cabrol, 2013), business (Kozusznik, Chrupala-Pniak, & Sulimowska-Formowicz, 2015; Phan, Styles, & Patterson, 2015) and psychology/human development (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Dekovic, 2001; Ngu & Florsheim, 2011).

Currently, scientific evidence and measurement is scarce in the relational competence of teachers (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). The importance of relationships appears to span across multiple fields, especially those that have frequent human interactions. The field of education and the profession of teaching is one in which the teacher and student must interact repeatedly, therefore a deeper understanding of the social and emotional competences of teachers, especially their theoretical relational effectiveness should be explored as well.

Social and emotional competences (SEC) have often been an umbrella term for a wide range of competences, from emotional intelligence to cognitive regulation (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Relational competence, also referred to as interpersonal competence, can be placed into this general framework of teachers’ SEC (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). *Relational Competence* is defined as teacher’s ability to see a

student as a unique being and to consequently adapt their own actions (behavior) without abandoning the leadership role and their authenticity, as well taking full responsibility for teacher-student relationship (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). According to Juul and Jensen (2010) the teacher's ability to *see a student* refers to the fact that teachers see beyond the most obvious apparent behavior or words of a student (e.g. see worry, fear, non-verbal resistance in a student's body even if a student verbally says 'yes') – a teacher collects this information and shapes their own view of a student and is able to give a student full recognition and acknowledgement. Juul and Jensen (2011) stated the basis for high-quality relationships is that students/children are understood and treated as individuals – as autonomous people who play an active role in building and maintaining relationships. This means that the teacher does things *with* the student and not *to* the student.

*Leadership* implies teachers' ability to plan and realize educational processes without damaging students sense of personal integrity (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). *Authenticity* refers to the teacher's ability and willingness to be personal in the relationship and develop a subject-subject relationship (i.e. two individuals engaged in the educational process), rather than a subject-object relationship (i.e. teachers as the one doing the teaching, transferring knowledge to the student) (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016).

Responsibility for the quality of the student-teacher relationship includes the ability to establish and maintain the relationships as well as to take an important position in the students' life; it is solely on the side of the teacher (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlam (2003) stated that the student-teacher relationship is asymmetrical and that teachers are responsible for creating contact and the quality of the relationship. Vidmar and Kerman (2016) believed that multiple components should all be merged into

a single component called *respect for individuality*. By combining these components, it is important for the teacher to not lose sight or overshadow a specific component and neglect another – taking students' psychological needs into account does not mean that learning is no longer important, rather that it is a prerequisite for learning (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016).

Jensen et al. (2015) described how the role of the 21<sup>st</sup> century teacher has changed from previous generations (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Values in education – teacher's authority*

<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Using power	Inclusion
Discipline	Dialogue
Focus on the child's behavior	Focus on relationship
Correcting	Empathy/Caring
Adjudicating	Acknowledgement, reflection
<b>Role-dependent authority</b>	<b>Personal authority</b>

Teachers see relations and interaction with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession (Jensen, et al., 2015). The Norwegian Ministry of Education in 2008 concluded that the competence to establish and maintain good teacher–student relations is a central and important one for a teacher in today's schools (Jensen et al., 2015). This conclusion was the launching point for a

current study looking at the Bachelor Degree Program for Teacher Education in Aarhus, Denmark, investigating the development of relational competence in both theory and practice. The project's overall aim was to break new ground in pedagogical research and teacher education, and the goal was to contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge within this academic field, so that relational competence can be understood and taught as part of ongoing development of teachers' professional competence (Jensen et al., 2015). Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen (2015) also stated in regard to teacher education programs and relationship building:

They have therefore been understood as and ascribed to aspects of the individual teacher's personality rather than as competencies to be developed. One consequence of this is that many teachers have been left to work with these factors by themselves; it is as if there might be a taboo involved in dealing with person related factors in teaching. The area of interpersonal relations and pedagogy is still primarily embedded in the individual teacher's private experience and values, which places limitations on the quality and scope of the work with relational competences in schools. (p. 204)

Having relational competence entails having a reflective approach to the significance of context to both interaction and learning processes in the school (Jensen et al., 2015). The *Context* classifies the message, emphasizing the importance of being aware, as a teacher, of how differences in position, role, intention, task, to name a few, contribute to defining the framework for interaction and for the interpretation of messages and actions.

Therefore, context is placed at the center of the model (see Figure 4). *Appreciation* is based on a principle of reciprocity between people and fundamental concerns showing respect for the other person's world of experience—meeting another person with an open

and genuine interest in that person's perspectives, experience, thoughts and feelings (Jensen et al., 2015). *Change of Perspective* encompasses how our intentions regarding what we do and how we view our lives in specific ways depending on the background and position in which we are placed within our culture and society. Jensen et al. (2015) indicated:

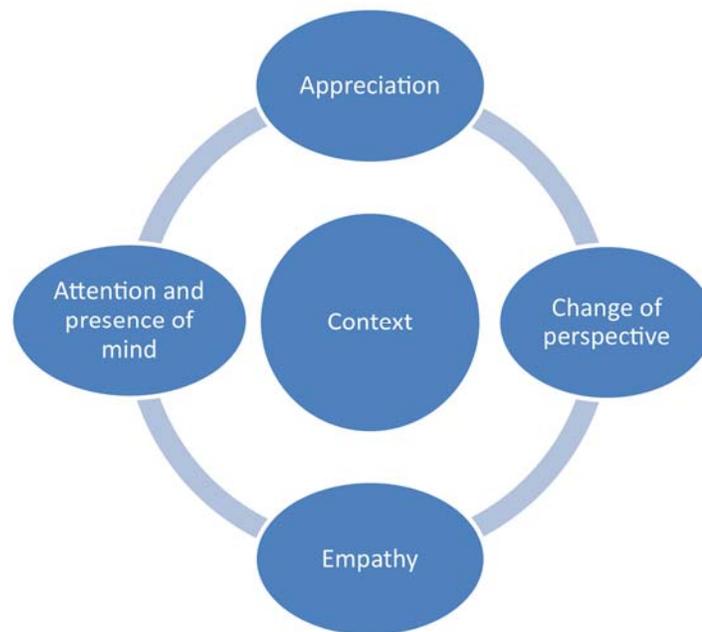
Our perspectives are formed continuously, intersecting others' perspectives. This can be called an intersubjective orientation that determines how we can take each other's viewpoints and how we can change our perspectives. In other words, both parties in a relationship must be willing to leave their own perspective for a while in order to view the world from the other party's perspective. (p. 208)

Teachers also have the responsibility for what characterizes the students' perspective and continuously match their actions accordingly (Jensen et al., 2015). *Empathy* concerns the ability to identify with, recognize and understand others' feelings, and is fundamentally a relational concept. Jensen et al. (2015) stated:

Our empathy is not freestanding but must be directed at someone and is characterized by a dynamic connection and separation at one and the same time. It may be useful to distinguish between empathy and sympathy, where sympathy entails compassion. When we sympathize with another person, we are emotionally affected and typically feel compelled to offer help; we become involved with our own feelings and find it difficult to separate our own experience from the other person's. Empathy entails separation in the sense that we imagine and empathize with what the other person is experiencing and feeling without taking over the other's feelings. Empathy is a fundamental precondition for our mental development and creativity, which develops during contacts and

relationships. Therefore, children depend on the adults around them to show understanding and take an interest in order for them to developing this competence. The final sub-element in this framework for relational competencies is *Attention and Presence of Mind*. These are closely related and concern the competence to be present both in relation to the person you are with and in relation to yourself. The good learning and development environment in school depends on the attention of both teachers and pupils (Jensen et al., 2015).

*Figure 4.* Sub-elements of relational competence



The teacher education program in the Netherlands is still in the data collection and analysis phase, so the results have not been systematized and finalized (Jensen et al., 2015). Although this new, innovative, deliberate, and focused relational competence approach to teacher education program does not yet have justifiable data, experiences over the past year and a half give reason to assume that the development and training of

attentive presence and empathy actually increase the students' relational competence.

Jensen et al. (2015) stated, "The development of relational competence is an area where research is in its infancy and further research is needed to generate findings that can help further develop student teachers' competences to be reflective in the twenty-first century" (p. 212). It should also be noted that no other studies of this nature or focus have been found within the United States.

Defining the role of relationships in a school context between teacher and students should focus on competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). The need for competence is concerned with the individual's desire to feel capable of coping with everyday challenges (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In a secondary school setting competence can be threatened by a variety of factors. These include not only increased competition in class, but also peer pressure, new demands from teachers, limited opportunity for detailed feedback from each teacher. The teacher can support competence by providing well-tailored and challenging tasks, which are not overwhelming, together with manageable responsibilities in class (Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009). The need for relatedness reflects the perceived degree of connectedness to others, the feeling of being personally accepted by and significant to others, as well as the feeling of being cared for by others and caring for them (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for relatedness at school can be satisfied by maintaining positive relationships with one's teachers which convey feelings of social connection (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Increased number of teachers in the lives of adolescents means that students start to perceive their teacher-student relationship as less-positive in comparison to elementary school. Existing findings suggest that positive student-teacher relationships promote a feeling of security and warmth, which supports a

sense of relatedness and, thereby, the students' motivation and engagement (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018). The need for autonomy is described as the developmental demand to self-regulate an activity so it becomes intrinsically important to an individual (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, findings on the perceptions of autonomy in secondary school context suggests that secondary teachers are more likely to use control, discipline, and rewards. Secondary teachers are also less likely to give students opportunity for decision making and emphasize grades and competition (Reeve, 2009). Particularly in adolescence, such behavior and instruction by teachers may put the perception of autonomy at risk. Teachers can promote autonomy through such practices as listening to student input, providing choice for students, showing students affection and emotional warmth. Relationship Motivation Theory (RMT) argues that it is not only the need for relatedness to others that is essential for high-quality relationships, but that relationship satisfaction and well-being can only be experienced if all three needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are satisfied within a relationship (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

### **Summary**

In conclusion, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) recognized the important role adults can play in the lives of children, especially teachers as they spend much of the day interacting with children in the mesosystem. This mesosystem helps makes connections between an individual's microsystems, therefore the teacher-student relationship can transform the development of both individuals (Bendtro, 2006). Relational Competence has recently been brought to the forefront of the teaching profession as the role of the teacher has evolved over time. As this relationship building process is a dynamic relationship, it is important to stress the student-teacher relationship is asymmetrical and

that teachers are responsible for creating contact and the quality of the relationship (Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlam, 2003). As this responsibility is now considered a professional responsibility in a 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, the Norwegian Ministry of Education has begun the process of creating a teaching framework of the teacher-student relationship building process. This framework focuses on *context, appreciation, change of perspective, empathy, and attention and presence of mind*. Through this framework teachers will hopefully begin to apply leadership and authenticity to their relationship building process with students, thus creating *respect for individuality* in each and every student (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). In order to promote healthy teacher-student relationships with adolescents, the teacher should meet the needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy with the students they teach.

## CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine quantitatively how U. S. educators, new to the profession, value their self-assessment towards Relational Competence (RC) and the building of positive relationships with adolescent students in high poverty schools. While a large and growing body of research on both classroom management and general and subject-specific teaching competency are available for teachers and teacher educators, the same cannot be said about relational competence (Jensen et al., 2015). Currently, scientific evidence is scarce in the RC of teachers and the measurement of teachers' RC is necessary to advance the science and research in the field of teachers' SEC (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016). The methodology of this study obtained survey data from new teachers (0-5 years of experience) who worked with at-risk adolescents using the Teachers' Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) developed by Vidmar and Kerman (2016). I then subjected the data to quantitative analysis using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Correlation statistical tests through SPSS software to quantify the RC of new teachers' self-assessment. Through the collection of this quantitative data I obtained information that helped determine if RC development and interventions are necessary to aid in the improvement of teacher preparation.

### **Research Questions and Hypothesis**

The knowledge gaps in research lead to knowledge gaps for practitioners. Pedagogical research and the teacher education programs have previously underestimated the significance of the more person-centered values, such as relations, respect and empathy, in teaching practice probably because these elements are perceived

to be natural and obvious elements of professional teaching (Jensen et al., 2015). Through the use of quantitative analysis, relational competences of new teachers (0-5 years of experience) were measured and analyzed using the Teachers' Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) developed by Vidmar and Kerman (2016).

### **Research Question**

- To what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel holistically prepared in their relational competence skills that build relationships with at-risk adolescents?

### **Hypotheses**

- *New teachers will report a low self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences working with at-risk adolescents.*
- *New teachers with a high self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences will desire to continue in the profession.*

### **Sub-Questions**

- To what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents?
- What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty?
- To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to future teacher attrition rates?

### **Proposed Research Design**

Quantitative research methodology was used to obtain data through the use of the TRCS. This data was subjected to an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Correlation

statistical tests. This methodology was chosen to systematically investigate new teachers' RC using statistical and mathematical techniques. This proposed research design was also implemented because in the United States there is very little quantitative data in the field of teachers' relational competence, especially that of new teachers. This study focused on new teachers (0-5 years of experience) of at-risk adolescents and their self-assessment scores in the area of relational competence. The independent variable was the years of professional experience new teachers had working with at-risk adolescents. These new teachers were either student teachers or educational professionals who have been working with at-risk adolescents for less than 5 years in a school setting. The dependent variable was the teachers' self-assessment scores using the Teacher Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) created and tested by Vidmar and Kerman (2016).

### **Proposed Participants/Data Sources and Recruitment**

The population of this study consisted of new teachers within a Western Maryland a public-school system located in the United States. This population was chosen to identify teachers who have less than 5 years of professional teaching experience and work with an at-risk adolescent population. This school system consisted of 13 middle schools, 10 high schools, and one alternative school for at-risk adolescents. I hoped to obtain a sample size greater than five hundred ( $n = 500+$ ) to reduce the margins of error. All participants were adults and the permission was obtained through the school system at the organizational level to perform research using their employees. This survey was administered through electronic mail to all participants and completed online. The participation in this survey was voluntary.

### Data Collection Tools

Data was collected through the use of an initial demographic section and a two-part electronic 5-point Likert-based scale (from *Very rarely or never*, to *Always or very often*). This survey was developed and administered using Qualtrics Survey Software through Creighton University. The initial demographic section (Appendix A) obtained: *Teacher work experience, gender, race, current work location, University where teacher certification was obtained, and perceived percentage of their students considered to be at-risk*. In part II of the survey, new teachers will be asked to complete the Teacher Relational Competence Scale, which was an 11-question survey (see Appendix B). Vidmar and Kerman (2016) identified 11 items that can aid in the measurement of teacher relational competence, which fall under two dimensions—individuality and responsibility (see Table 2).

Table 2

#### *Teacher Relational Competence Scale: Individuality and Responsibility*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Questions</b>
Individuality	1, 3, 4, 9
Responsibility	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11

Part III of this electronic survey consisted of 7 questions to aid in the understanding of teacher preparation, working with at-risk students, and potential retention/attrition rates of new teachers (see Appendix C). These questions were also a 5-point Likert-based scale (from *strongly agree or agree* to *disagree to strongly disagree*).

In conclusion, these three sections were used to collect demographic information, teacher relational competence using the TRCS, and finally data that helped address teacher preparation, working specifically with at-risk adolescents, and potential retention/attrition rates of new teachers (0-5 years).

### **Proposed Data Collection Procedures**

I began recruiting participants after the review and approval process of the Internal Review Board (IRB). I contacted the research departments of the school system and worked with organizational leadership to identify participants who would be considered new teachers (0-5 years teaching experience). Once I identified these candidates, I began collecting data in the Spring of 2018 through electronic mail. I provided surveys to all participants, allowing a two-week deadline for completion. I distributed an introductory email (see Appendix D) that informed participants about the study, and at that point obtained consent. After one week, I gave an electronic mail reminder to those participants that did not complete the survey, with a final notice sent out two days prior to the conclusion of the survey deadline.

### **Ethical Considerations**

At the time this data was collected, I was considered an employee of the current school system. I was on sabbatical leave, but it is still important to recognize the role that this position may play as participants were invited to take part in this study. All participants were given a participants' bill of rights (see Appendix E) for this study. In order to guard anonymity and confidentiality, surveys did not ask for participants by name. Survey results were stored in a secure, password protected environment, only accessible by myself. The safeguarding of the person and the data were of the utmost

importance to me, as *Cura Personalis* (care of the entire person) is at the core of my research study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Once the data was collected, the use of descriptive statistics was used to summarize the data. I used IBM SPSS to organize and analyze the data. Through the use of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Correlation statistical analysis, I hoped to answer the proposed research questions. The ANOVA compared the means between different groups of teachers, for example, the relational competence of teachers could have shown a possible variance within the first five years of teaching for a specific group. I then conducted a Correlation analysis to describe the degree of relationship between relational competence and potential teacher attrition rates. Collectively this data could have been significant as it looked at multiple independent variables and the potential associations with relational competence and the possible retention/attrition of new teachers. Through the guidance of my dissertation committee, additional analysis tests were discussed to obtain supplementary information unforeseen by myself.

### **Timeline for the Study**

Roberts (2010) stated that one of the best times to collect data is between January-April. This study began immediately after the approval process. I also obtained written permission from Vidmar and Kerman to use the TRCS in my study. Here was a detailed overview of the proposed Dissertation in Practice (DIP) timeline:

January: Proposal and IRB review.

February: Work with school system to identify survey participants. Develop survey and pilot on a small group of individuals before distributing to the entire population.

March-April: Distribute survey and collect data.

May-June: Analyze data.

July: Communicate results of the data and complete the DIP.

Although this 6-month window appeared to be daunting, I was on sabbatical and hoped to complete the DIP by July and orally defend in the Summer or Fall of 2018.

### **Reflections of the Researcher**

This Dissertation in Practice (DIP) has a professional and personal component as a topic of research interest. As an individual who has devoted his entire professional life working with adolescents, it has been abundantly clear that relationships with students can impact not only their immediate lives, but also how they view and interact with the world for many years to come. My educational leadership training helped me to develop an awareness of the “bigger picture” viewpoint of education, but I never lost sight of the personal impact a teacher can have on a single individual (*Unity of Heart, Mind, & Soul*). As Creighton is a Jesuit institution that focuses on service to others and a passion for justice, this DIP was also designed to try and determine if there was a necessary change that should take place to try and help new teachers develop a mantra of *Cura Personalis* as it relates to at-risk adolescents.

As I mentioned previously, this topic also had a personal element. As an adolescent, I found myself yearning to find meaningful relationships with adults, especially teachers that I felt cared about me. As an adolescent, I had a teacher who exhibited kindness, empathy, and a passion for education. After spending many years in this teacher’s classroom, it changed the way in which I viewed the world. This relationship put me on a path of pursuing justice and having concern for the poor and

marginalized (*Women and Men for and with Others*). As I grew out of the stage of adolescents and embarked on the journey of adulthood, I had to decide what professional path I would choose to make my mark on this world. I then thought back to the relationship that I had with this teacher and the impact it had on my life during the vulnerable developmental stage of adolescents. At this moment, I decided to go into education to become a teacher, focusing on being a caring and supportive adult for other children who might also be struggling in adolescents (*Forming & Educating Agents of Change*).

As this DIP is a culminating project to obtain a doctoral degree in Interdisciplinary Leadership, I also think the focus of fostering transformational change played a role in my DIP topic. I believe this study can have an immediate impact by causing individuals to self-reflect on their interactions with children. The concept of reflective practice and discernment have been stressed throughout this program, and this was a primary reason in why I chose a self-assessment survey. The procurement of data may also helped identify and quantify if relational competence was as large of a problem as my anecdotal observations had lead me to believe. Through the acquisition of data and quantitative analysis, if relational competence of at-risk adolescents was shown to be “problematic”, I hoped to develop an intervention that could be implemented to transform the way in which teachers and administrators teach and interact with their students. This study also focused on self-awareness and the incorporation of Jesuit values into action to create positive societal and educational change.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

**Introduction**

Chapter Four is a presentation of the findings related to this quantitative survey-based study that explored to what extent new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel holistically prepared in their relational competence skills that build relationships with at-risk adolescents. This chapter will include a summary of the descriptive statistics and the detailed findings of the data related to the aforementioned hypotheses.

The study addressed multiple research sub-questions: 1) to what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents? 2) What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty? 3) To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to anticipated teacher attrition rates? Each of these sub-questions included analysis to potentially determine if relational competence and future attrition rates are connected.

**Description of the Sample**

This survey was distributed to 274 teachers via email in March 2018 and remained open for approximately one month. This survey was created using Qualtrics and had a response rate of approximately 24%.

Table 3

*Survey Response Rates*

<i>Number sent</i>	<i>Started</i>	<i>Completed</i>
274	67 (24%)	54 (20%)

As presented in in Table 3, 67 participants completed portions of the three-part survey which compromise the final sample size for analysis. This equates to approximately 24% of the total sample size of new teachers within the western Maryland school system, but only 20% of participants completed all three sections of this survey.

### Descriptive Statistics

There were 67 participants included in the final analysis for this study, of which each individual was guaranteed anonymity in their responses as a volunteer participant. These 67 participants completed at least one section of the three-part survey, which also included some demographic and descriptive questions about their gender, ethnicity, and years of teaching experience. These results are outlined in Table 4. The average teaching experience for a new teacher in this school system was about 3 years ( $M = 2.9$ ) with  $s = 1.64$ . Additionally, participants were asked what University they obtained their teacher certification (Table 5) and what perceived percentage of the students they currently taught lived in poverty (Table 6). Table 5 indicates that teacher certification was obtained from a multitude of different locations, out of 65 responses 35 different locations were cited. Table 6 also indicates that teachers believe that at least 60% of all students come from a home classified as low-poverty or greater ( $M = 31.94$ ) with a  $s = 17.59$ .

Table 4

#### *Descriptive Statistics Overview*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Gender ( $n = 64$ )	Male	21	32%
	Female	43	68%

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Ethnicity ( <i>n</i> = 65)	White	60	92%
	Black or African American	1	<2%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0%
	Asian	2	3%
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0%
	Latina/Latino	1	<2%
	Other	1	<2%
Years of teaching experience ( <i>n</i> = 50)	0	4	8%
	1	9	18%
	2	6	12%
	3	8	16%
	4	12	24%
	5	11	22%

Table 5

*University: Teacher Certification*

	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Teacher Certification ( <i>N</i> = 67)	APU	1	1.5%
	Career changer	1	1.5%
	Dickinson College	1	1.5%
	East Stroudsburg University	1	1.5%
	Frostburg State University	3	4.5%
	Goucher College	1	1.5%
	Grand Canyon University	2	3.0%
	Hood College	6	9.0%
	Indiana University of PA	1	1.5%
	James Madison University	1	1.5%
	Kutztown University	2	3.0%
	Marshall University	1	1.5%
	Milligan College	1	1.5%
	Mixture of Schools	1	1.5%
	Mount St. Mary's University	9	12.3%
	N/A	1	1.5%
	Notre Dame of Maryland University (pending)	1	1.5%
	Nursing - FCC	1	1.5%
	out of state	1	1.5%
	Penn State University	1	1.5%
	Rio Salado College	1	1.5%
	Salisbury University	4	6.2%
	Shepherd	6	9.0%
	Slippery Rock University	1	1.5%
	Towson University	1	1.5%
	U of MD	1	1.5%
	UMBC	3	4.5%
	UMUC	3	4.5%
	University of Delaware	1	1.5%
	University of Phoenix	1	1.5%
University of Pittsburgh	1	1.5%	
University of Rochester	1	1.5%	
Washington	1	1.5%	
Western Governors University	1	1.5%	
Westfield State University	1	1.5%	
WVU	1	1.5%	
Total	65	97.0%	
Missing	2	3.0%	

Table 6

*Perceived Poverty*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Perceived Poverty ( <i>N</i> = 65)	0-25%	26	40%
	26-50%	30	46%
	51-75%	7	11%
	76-100%	1	<2%

### Statistical Correlations of the Teacher Relational Competence Scale

The following is a detailed analysis as it relates to the study's fundamental model which hypothesized what extent new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel holistically prepared in their relational competence skills that build relationships with at-risk adolescents. The researcher tested hypotheses using the Teacher Relational Competence Scale (TRCS) developed by Vidmar and Kerman (2016). Vidmar and Kerman (2016) identified 11 items that can aid in the measurement of teacher relational competence, these items fall under two dimensions—*Individuality* and *Responsibility*. Through the use of a 5-point Likert-based scale, survey participants self-assessed their relational competence in these two areas. Table 7 describes the percentage of teachers who responded either *most of the time* or *always* to each question.

The first hypothesis stated that new teachers would report a low self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences working with at-risk adolescents. Individuality had a mean score of ( $M = 4.10$ ) and Responsibility ( $M = 3.88$ ), thus being the opposite of what was hypothesized. The study by Vidmar and Kerman (2016)

sampled teachers from the fourth and eighth grade with no restrictions on years of experience. The scores reported by Vidmar and Kerman (2016) in the areas of Individuality ( $M = 4.29$ ) and Responsibility ( $M = 3.91$ ) compared to the scores determined in this study can be found in Table 8.

Table 7

*Teacher Relational Competence Scale (TRCS)*

<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD.</i>
<b>Individuality</b>				
( $N = 58$ ): I take into consideration that each student's thoughts, feelings, and understanding of a given situation may differ from mine	51	88%	4.21	0.8
( $N = 57$ ): I am open to student ideas and suggestions and I consider them when teaching.	45	79%	4.11	0.85
( $N = 58$ ): I take into consideration that each student experiences a given situation from a different perspective.	47	81%	4.22	0.79
( $N = 58$ ): I am aware that each student has his/her own way of thinking and functioning, so I try to adjust my behavior accordingly.	40	69%	3.84	0.94
<b>Responsibility</b>				
( $N = 58$ ): When a student behaves or expresses in an inappropriate or unsuitable way, I try to understand what lies under his/her behavior or words.	45	78%	4.02	0.82
( $N = 58$ ): As a teacher, I take full responsibility for the quality of the student-teacher relationship.	48	83%	4.03	0.79

(N = 58): I can effectively collaborate with every student or class.	38	66%	3.72	0.74
(N = 58): I am not insulted by students' inappropriate/offensive behavior or statements; I think of them as expression of imbalances between the student and myself/environment.	38	66%	3.74	0.92
(N = 58): When I can't build a good relationship with a student, I ask him/her for help.	31	53%	3.34	1.11
(N = 58): If I find myself in repeated conflicts with a certain student or a group of students, I consider my behavior and usually modify it accordingly.	43	74%	3.84	1.03
(N = 58): I see relationships with each student as an opportunity for my personal and professional growth.	52	90%	4.4	0.96

Table 8

*TRCS scores*

	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
	Individuality	Responsibility
Storch	4.10	3.88
Vidmar & Kerman	4.29	3.91

The second hypothesis was new teachers with a high self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences will desire to continue in the profession. Through the use of correlation analysis, it was determined that a moderate to strong positive correlation between TRCS scores and teacher attrition may exist (see Table 9). As correlation statistics (*r*) range between -1 and 1, with 0 representing no linear relation,

this data appears statistically significant, showing a positive relationship between TRCS scores and the potential retention as endorsed by new teachers. Among new teachers, *Responsibility* scores and *Individuality* scores were positively correlated ( $r = .429, p = .001$  and  $r = .353, p = .009$ , respectively) with believing that they would be a K-12 educator for more than five years. These same individuals also demonstrated a positive correlation as it pertains to rarely thinking about another profession *Individuality* ( $r = .312, p = .022$ ) and *Responsibility* ( $r = .362, p = .007$ ).

### Sub-Questions

The third and final part of this survey explored multiple research sub-questions: 1) To what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents? 2) What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty? and 3) To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to anticipated teacher attrition rates? Each of these sub-questions included analysis to potentially determine if relational competence and future attrition rates are connected. Table 9 addresses these sub-questions, while also noting how many teachers ( $N$ ) either *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree* with each question.

Table 9

#### *Descriptive statistics of sub-questions*

Item	$N$	%	$M$	$SD$
My University teacher preparation adequately equipped me to build positive relationships with at-risk adolescents.	27	50%	3.20	1.3
Teaching at-risk adolescents in the “real-world” is similar to how I thought it would be.	27	50%	3.31	1.15

QUANTIFYING NEW TEACHER REALATIONAL COMPETENCE				46
I had similar experiences in my own teenage years to many of the students I currently teach.	26	48%	3.22	1.34
The majority of my students come from poverty.	13	25%	2.45	1.25
The relationships I have with my students are a major contributor to my professional and personal happiness.	51	94%	4.61	0.7
I rarely think about another profession other than one in K-12 education.	24	44%	3.07	1.04
I believe I will be a K-12 educator for more than 5+ years.	38	70%	4	1.28

This data was analyzed using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) model for sub-question 1 and 2: what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents and what personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty. This analysis determined that there was *no statistical significance* between teacher relational Subcompetence scores and University training. However, only 50% of survey participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* ( $M = 3.20$ ) that their University training adequately equipped them to build positive relationships with at-risk adolescents. In addition, only 50% of new teachers *agreed* or *strongly agreed* ( $M = 3.31$ ) that teaching in the “real-world” was similar to how they thought it would be. New teachers also reported that less than half (48%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed* to having similar experience in their own teenage years to many of the students that they currently teach. The third sub-question that focused on what extent do new teachers’ self-assessment scores correlate to anticipated teacher attrition rates was analyzed using SPSS and a correlation model, and as discussed in Table 10 there appears

to be a moderate to strong positive correlation to potential retention of new teachers if self-assessment scores in the area of relational competence are high.

Table 10

*Correlation Between TRCS Scores and Teacher Retention*

	1	2	3	4
I believe I will be a K-12 educator for more than 5+ years.	-			
I rarely think about another profession other than one in K-12 education.	.560**	-		
Individuality	.353**	.312*	-	
Responsibility	.429*	.362**	.742**	-

Note: \*\*  $p < .001$  level (2-tailed), \*  $p < .01$  level (2-tailed).

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the study results which included a brief review of the methodology, descriptive statistics related to the sample, and overview of the data analysis procedures, while also providing detailed findings of the data centered around the relational competence of new teachers who work with at-risk adolescents. Based on the quantitative data related to the 67 responses that were analyzed, a positive correlation was found between teachers who score highly on the TRCS and their future intentions of staying in the public K-12 teaching profession for more than 5 years. The hypothesis that new teachers would report low self-assessment scores using the TRCS was found to be not supported, as it was fairly consistent with the data collected by Vidmar and Kerman (2016).

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

**Introduction**

The main purpose of my study was to determine quantitatively how U. S. educators, new to the profession, value their self-assessment towards Relational Competence (RC) and the building of positive relationships with adolescent students in high poverty schools. RC is also referred to as interpersonal competence and can be placed in the general framework of teachers' social-emotional competences (SEC). Currently, scientific evidence is scarce in the RC of teachers and the measurement of teachers' RC is necessary to advance the science and research in the field of teachers' SEC (Vidmar & Kerman, 2016).

I found that 94 percent of new teachers believed that relationships with their students were a major contributor to their professional and personal happiness. I also discovered that new teachers responded at a rate of 90 percent that they viewed relationships with each student as an opportunity for personal and professional growth. Based on these findings, it is clear that many new teachers in this school system see the "power" of relationships in their professional and personal lives, but many teachers see relations and interaction with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching (Jensen et al., 2015). In this chapter I include a discussion and summary of the conclusions regarding the problem statement, methodology, hypotheses, and research questions that were originally proposed. Furthermore, presented is an overview of the implications and application of the survey results with a potential intervention that could aid in building the relational competence of new teachers, especially those that work with at-risk adolescents.

**Research Question****Hypothesis**

- *New teachers will report a low self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences working with at-risk adolescents.*
- *New teachers with a high self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences will desire to continue in the profession.*

**Sub-Questions**

- To what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents?
- What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty?
- To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to anticipated teacher attrition rates?

I administered a three-part Likert-based survey was used to collect data in the areas of demographics, relational competence using the Teacher Relational Competence Scale (TRCS), and potential future retention/attrition rates of new teachers who work with at-risk adolescents.

Through the use of statistical analysis with SPSS, I used an ANOVA and correlation model to analyze the survey results.

Based on the data, the hypothesis that *new teachers will report a low self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences working with at-risk adolescents* was not supported. The TRCS is broken down into two components:

*Individuality and Responsibility.* New teachers within this school system had scores for Individuality ( $M = 4.10$ ) and Responsibility ( $M = 3.88$ ) that almost mirrored the data collected by Vidmar and Kerman (2016). Vidmar and Kerman (2016) collected data from 562 teachers of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade (54% response rate). Their sample was 85 percent female and they also received responses from 136 Slovenian schools. As this research was conducted on US teachers who are new to the profession, the data collected surprisingly almost mirrored (see Table 8) that of Vidmar and Kerman (2016).

My hypothesis that *new teachers with a high self-assessment using the TRCS in the area of relational competences will desire to continue in the profession* was supported and showed a positive correlation between high relational competence (RC) and new teacher retention. New teachers who scored highly in *Responsibility* ( $r = 0.429$ ) and *Individuality* ( $r = 0.353$ ) demonstrated a positive correlation in believing that they would be a K-12 educator for more than five years. These same individuals also demonstrated a positive correlation as it pertains to rarely thinking about another profession:

*Individuality* ( $r = 0.312$ ) and *Responsibility* ( $r = 0.362$ ).

My study attempted to address multiple research sub-questions: [Q1] to what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents? [Q2] What personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty? [Q3] To what extent do new teachers' self-assessment scores correlate to anticipated teacher attrition rates? Each of these sub-questions included analysis to potentially determine if relational competence and future attrition rates are connected. Sub-question 1: to what extent do new teachers (0-5 years of experience) feel their

teacher certification courses prepared them to build positive teacher-student relationships with at-risk adolescents demonstrates no statistical significance. Sub-question 2: what personal experiences impede teacher-student relationship building with adolescents from poverty also showed no statistical significance. These first two sub-questions were shown to have no statistical significance as it pertains to relational competence, but there might be some potential insight to be gained from this data.

The aim of this study is to inform teacher preparation programs, trainers, and providers of educational professional development in the assessment levels of teacher relational competences. If educators' assessment in the area of relational competences appears to be low, it might be necessary to change teacher preparation and professional development methodology to aid in the pedagogical acquisition of positive teacher-student relationship building.

This data stated that only 50% of new teachers either *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that their University preparation adequately prepared them to work with at-risk adolescents, while nearly a third (33.33%) either *strongly* or *somewhat disagreed*. New teachers also *agreed* or *strongly agreed* at a rate of 50% that teaching in the "real-world" was similar to what they thought it would be. It was also determined that only 48 percent of new teachers felt they had similar teenage experiences of the students they currently teach. Although *no statistical significance* was found using SPSS, it perplexes the researcher where relational competence was then obtained. If life experiences as explained by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) *Ecological Systems Theory* (EST) and University preparation are not a foundation in which relational competence was constructed for the majority of teachers of at-risk adolescents, then where was it acquired?

### Conclusions

This study collected partial data from 67 participants (return rate of 24%) and completed data from 54 individuals (return rate of 20%). The majority of participants identified as White ( $N = 62$ ), while only 1 participant identified as Black and 1 participant identified as Latino/Latina (see Table 4). Although this study asked new teachers to self-assess the percentage of students who come from poverty ( $M = 30\%$ ), not the demographic information of students, nearly half of all Hispanic and Black public-school students attended high poverty schools. In contrast, 8% of White students attended high-poverty schools (NCES, 2017).

Sanchez and Dunning (2018) stated, “Of all the errors and biases people make in self and social judgement, overconfidence arguably shows the widest range in its implications and the most trouble in its potential costs” (p. 10). The “beginner’s bubble” suggests that people begin their career at some task by being quite cautious and unconfident, but that they quickly become overconfident—the beginner’s bubble—before going through a “correction” phase in which confidence flattens while performance continues to improve (Sanchez & Dunning, 2018). In this study only 50 percent of participants either *somewhat agreed* or *strongly agreed* ( $M = 3.20$ ) that their University preparation adequately equipped them to build positive relationships with at-risk adolescents. Also referring back to Bronfenbrenner’s EST (1977), only 48 percent of participants *somewhat agreed* or *strongly agreed* ( $M = 3.22$ ) to have had similar teenage experiences of the students they currently teach. Therefore, new teachers’ self-assessment of their own perceived relational competence might fall into the beginner’s bubble, especially if they have not had a wide range of experiences, formally or

informally, with at-risk adolescents. Sanchez and Dunning (2018) suggested a potential resolution to this dilemma might require being mindful of English philosopher R. G. Collingwood when he observed that people cease to be beginners in any craft or science, and become instead masters, at the moment they realize they are going to be beginners for the rest of their lives.

As the bulk of respondents in this study identified as White (92%), and the majority of respondents also identified as female (68%). The most recent data provided by the United States Department of Education (2014) stated that 76.3 percent of public school teachers in the U.S. are female and 81.9 percent of teachers identified themselves as White. Davis, Mirick, and McQueen (2015) described the limiting effects their privilege, including making assumptions about their students' experiences, displaying bias in their choice of teaching materials, and not meeting student learning needs. Davis, Mirick, and McQueen (2015) also stated that the process of coming to see privilege is an intentional and ongoing choice and those in positions of privilege may recognize the impact of that privilege on their worldview. In this study, it is proposed that new teachers might fall into "the beginner's bubble" as it pertains to relational competence of at-risk adolescents. This potential bubble "burst" could possibly be the reason why so many individuals decide to leave the teaching profession before the 5-year mark of their careers.

### **Proposed Solution**

Based on these results, I recommend a solution consisting of increased professional development that builds upon University training, specifically focusing on the ecological systems of the at-risk adolescents this school system serves. I chose this

recommendation because only 50% of participants stated that their University training prepared them to build relationships with at-risk adolescents. I also recommend professional development that focuses on the ecological systems of the organization's students because only 48% of new teachers responded that they had similar experiences in their own teenage years compared to the students that they teach. I also found that 94 percent of new teachers believed that relationships with their students were a major contributor to their professional and personal happiness and by creating a professional development that focuses on relationship building could potentially impact potential attrition rates.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) tried to describe the distinctive situations in which every human being develops and constructs them as unique, but those that share similar experiences might possess similar outlooks on the world. The constructs and outcomes of Bronfenbrenner's EST provided the framework for this potential intervention. The CURA model, which was developed by the researcher, is a potential professional development framework recommendation to aid educational leaders who work with new teachers. These educational leaders can potentially help new teachers become aware of conceivable unconscious overconfidence and sense of privilege that may occur early in their careers. The CURA model was designed not only for teachers to look at the multiple systems that they will be asked to navigate (individual, school-based, organizational, national), but also to construct a similar outlook on larger organizational goals of the current school system. This framework is outlined in Table 11.

*Cura* in Latin means to help or care, and this model is designed with the professional and personal lives of teachers in mind. Educational leaders should be able to

conduct professional development sessions 4 times throughout the year (2 hours each) in order to support new teachers in their schools. “The area of interpersonal relations and pedagogy is still primarily embedded in the individual teacher’s private experience and values, which places limitations on the quality and scope of the work with relational competences in schools” (Jensen et al., 2015, p. 204). In order to make sure new teachers do not feel isolated in dealing with interpersonal relationship challenges, educational leaders should develop a small cohort of new teachers that are able to collaborate and work together to see that others might also be struggling with relational competences as well.

Table 11.

*CURA Model*

<p><b>C</b></p> <p>CONTEXT</p>	<p><b>U</b></p> <p>URIE</p>	<p><b>R</b></p> <p>RESEARCH</p>	<p><b>A</b></p> <p>ASCEND</p>
<p>TIMELINE</p>			
<p>AUG SEP OCT</p>	<p>NOV DEC JAN</p>	<p>FEB MAR</p>	<p>APR MAY</p>
<p>TASKS</p>			
<p>STUDENT LIVES</p> <p>“REAL-WORLD”</p> <p>FRAMEWORK OF TEACHING</p> <p>POTENTIAL BIASES</p> <p>PRIVELAGE</p> <p>BEGINNER’S BUBBLE</p>	<p>REFLECTION</p> <p>APPRECIATION</p> <p>ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY</p>	<p>ADOLESCENT BRAIN</p> <p>ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR</p> <p>ADOLSECENT SOCIAL LIVES</p>	<p>DISCUSS GROWTH</p> <p>REFLECT ON RELATIONSHIPS</p> <p>EMPATHY</p> <p>BUILD AN ATTENTIVE PRESENCE</p>

### **Action Plan**

Boyle, Lamprianou, and Boyle (2004) stated, “data suggest, reassuringly, that the majority of participants who do take part in longer-term professional development do change one or more aspects of their teaching practice” (p. 64). This communication plan suggests that teachers of adolescents (middle and high school), new to the profession, take part in a dedicated professional development plan that will help prepare them for the realities and challenges of teaching the vulnerable population of the organization’s adolescents. Gusky (2003) reminded us that professional development must be well organized, carefully structured, and purposefully directed. Therefore, it is recommended that the school system implement the CURA model for new secondary teachers.

In the beginning of the year, all secondary school administrators will identify new secondary teachers and inform them of this professional development opportunity. Takahashi (2011) reminded us that, teachers’ efficacy beliefs influence the amount of effort teachers put into teaching, their willingness to adopt new teaching strategies, and their ability to persevere in the face of challenges. These ideas grow out of theories about self-efficacy developed by Albert Bandura, which state that the more people believe they can impact positive future outcomes, the more motivated they will be to work towards these outcomes, and thus, achieve them (Bandura, 1997). Teachers will then form a county-wide professional learning community (PLC), allowing these new teachers to an opportunity to learn and grow collectively. Dever and Lash (2013) found that PLC’s can reduce isolation, provide support for teacher development, and can create a sense of shared student responsibility among staff members. Takahashi (2011) also found that “teachers’ reifications of data and the procedures of data analysis carried with them

certain implicit message about the responsibility of teachers and their capacity to improve” (p. 739).

### **Implementation**

The implementation of this plan begins with communication and a building of organizational community. At the beginning of the school year (August/September), all new secondary teachers will come together collaboratively and a full-day introductory meeting will take place at the central office. This initial meeting should take place during new teacher training on August 27, 2018. This initial meeting will also help new teachers build connections with other new teachers, thus hopefully providing a professional and personal resource moving forward. This initial meeting should be led by a professional development coordinator, but statements by organizational leadership, such as: the superintendent, associate superintendents, and secondary (middle and high school) directors should be made to help them build a personal connection between organizational leadership and these new stakeholders.

The organization’s research data showed that over 50% of new teachers felt like their University training did not prepare them for teaching in the “real” world. While another 50% of the school system’s secondary teachers said their teenage experiences were different than the experiences of the students they were asked to teach. This first stage of the *CURA* method is *Context*. In this initial meeting, teachers will ride a school bus and see areas of poverty throughout the county. This school systems tour will also allow new teachers to see the different areas of this western Maryland county and hopefully provide some context into the leadership challenges that such a large and diverse geographic area can have on policy making. After returning from the tour and

engaging with other new teachers, discussions on the “real-world” of teaching in the organization will take place. This communication will take place face-to-face, but an electronic cohort community will also be formed so teachers can continue to work together in this newly formed PLC.

The second part of the day will center around the topics of potential biases, privilege, and the “beginner’s bubble”. As the school system’s teaching demographics do not mirror student demographics, it is important to begin to have conversations about cultural responsiveness and how to *REACH* the organization’s students who come from different backgrounds and experiences than ourselves. After these discussions, new teachers will be encouraged to provide examples over the first month of the school year in which they recognize moments of bias, privilege, and beginner’s bubble in their specific school. The main objective of this training is to provide new teachers individualized context and build a sense of community between the organization-to-individual and individual-to-individual.

One of the difficult aspects of professional development is finding a common time for all teachers to be able to meet. This school system consists of over 23 middle and high schools, therefore a deliberate effort should be made to accommodate the professional and personal lives of this cohort. On November 5<sup>th</sup>, there is a teacher work day scheduled for all teachers. Teachers are able to work in their schools or from home on these days. Therefore, this is an ideal day to have an electronic PLC to conduct the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of *CURA: Urie*. This professional development session would be a 2-hour long session that is held remotely using the internet, led by a professional development coordinator. This session will focus on teachers’ reflections of the real-world of teaching

for the organization after the first two months. Conversations about the theoretical and practical side of teaching will be discussed, while also focusing on the concept of appreciation. Through the use of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) EST, new teachers can learn to appreciate where and who they currently are based on their own personal experiences, interactions that they have experienced, and chronology throughout their own lives. By recognizing how their own systems have influenced their own lives, they hopefully can begin to recognize the impact that they can have on the students they teach. This can help create a sense of appreciation that is based on a principle of reciprocity between people and fundamental concerns showing respect for the other person's world of experience—meeting another person with an open and genuine interest in that person's perspectives, experience, thoughts, and feelings (Jensen et al., 2015).

The third component of CURA is *Research*, and this professional development session will focus on adolescents in general. The lives of current adolescents should be explored by new teachers, especially those of at-risk adolescents. This intervention should begin with the most up-to-date research centered around the adolescent brain. Adolescents has recently been recognized as a unique stage of physical, social, and cognitive development that is rife with risky behaviors and increased emotional reactivity (Casey et al., 2008). As stated earlier, this is a difficult time in the lives of many individuals, and teachers can make a life-long impact on the lives the students that they teach. January 28, there is another teacher work day, which will allow teachers the flexibility to either meet in person or to work in a virtual environment. It is advised that teachers come together as a whole group to attend a meeting at the staff development

center to help build community, but based on the needs of the group an asynchronous discussion could take place in the virtual environment that has been previously created.

The fourth and final component of *CURA* is *Ascend*. On April 5, a final two-hour professional development session will take place at the staff development center, culminating with a luncheon to celebrate these new teachers. Ascending is the process of going up or climbing, and the teaching profession needs individuals who are able to adapt to the current state of the profession. By culminating on where you were in the process at the beginning and seeing how things have changed over the course of your first year, this intervention could potentially aid in the transformation process of new teachers.

### **Evaluation**

Through much of the research on professional development it has been made clear that measuring the effectiveness of professional development can be difficult. Boyle et al. (2005) stated, “Although there is a large body of international literature on professional development, little high-quality research has been conducted on either the relationship between characteristics of professional development and change in teachers’ classroom teaching practice” (p. 48). This professional development is not subject specific and there are no test scores to measure, but the US Department of Education found that many teachers believed that job-embedded, collaborative professional development activities, such as common planning time, being formally monitored by another teacher or networking with other teachers outside the school, are more helpful as professional development than the more traditional forms of development strategies (Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, 2005). One form of measuring the effectiveness of the

*CURA* model is by looking at the retention rates of these teachers over the first five years of their careers.

The Department of Education (2017) stated that 48 states and The District of Columbia all reported having teacher shortages. These teacher shortages lead to emergency certifications, which could have individuals teaching children with very little professional educator training. Teacher educational enrollments nationwide have also dropped 35% between the years of 2009-2014 (Ostroff, 2017). Rinke (2007) regards new teacher attrition as a “silent crisis” (p. 3). While there is some disagreement about the actual percentage of teachers who leave teaching in their first five years (from 5% to 50%), “one very stable finding is that attrition is high for young teachers” (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006, p. 10). Feistritzer (2011) stated that the largest percentage of teachers (29%) is newer to the profession (0-5 years of experience). Cornu (2013) described how new teachers are both sustained by and drained by the relationships they developed with their students.

In conclusion, many teachers see relations and interaction with the students as the most difficult aspect of teaching, and they experience that their teacher training does not prepare them sufficiently for these aspects of the teaching profession (Jensen et al., 2015). The research data showed that 94% of new teachers said that the relationships they have with students brings them personal and professional happiness. Through the use of the *CURA* model, this organization might be able to help teachers build relationships with their students, hopefully supporting them and helping stem the tide of new teacher attrition.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

A few limiting factors to this study were the number of responses ( $N = 67$ ) and the self-assessing nature of this survey. An additional limiting factor is the amount of research to be found on relational competence and the impact it has on the teaching profession. The TRCS was only previously used in Slovenian schools and is fairly new (2016). Another limiting factor had to deal with perceived levels of poverty, as FARMS data is used to measure poverty in schools, teachers were asked to gauge their perceived student poverty. This could have been problematic as poverty is not the only factor that classifies a student as “at-risk”. A delimiting factor was the geographical isolation of the sample population. Although a multitude of University training preparation programs were present, the sample all fell under one organization located in only in the state of Maryland.

Future research could potentially determine if there is a “beginner’s bubble” for educational professionals and when does that bubble “pop”. The area of teaching relational competence in teacher preparation programs at the University level has also not been researched within the United States. As our society continues to change, the ecological systems of today’s students also are evolving, therefore research on adolescent behavior for the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner should also be considered. Research in the area of perceived and actual relational competence from the students’ perspective could also be beneficial.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In sum, this research suggests that the building of relationships with students is looked upon as a professional and personal reward for many new teachers. This relationship building is also viewed as an opportunity for professional growth. The relationship building process is a bi-directional process in which students can help children grow, while new teachers also can evolve throughout the relationship building process. A positive teacher-student relationship helps children build connectedness (value and a sense of belonging) (Goodenow, 1993), enhanced well-being, self-esteem, and self-worth (Frydenberg, Care, Chan, & Freeman, 2009), higher academic performance and improved school behavior (Klem & Connell, 2004).

The United States is in the midst of a major teacher shortage and new teachers (0-5 years of experience) now make up the largest percentage (26%) of those in the profession (Feistritz, 2011). The majority of public K-12 schools are now attended by low-income families (Layton, 2015). Many of the students that new teachers are asked to teach will be classified “at-risk” due to their poverty levels. As the majority of teachers in the United States are White and female, it is imperative that a conversation is started about the unconscious biases and privileges that teachers might possess. By bringing these unconscious variables into the open, hopefully new teachers can begin to understand how they developed through their own life experiences and interactions. New teachers also need to research and understand the realities facing today’s adolescents, especially those who are considered at-risk. Although a professional development framework was proposed, educational leaders need to make sure that they can provide a context for each specific location, as not all school systems have the same needs. Urie

Bronfenbrenner (1977) recognized the important role adults can play in the lives of children, especially teachers as they spend much of the day interacting with children in the mesosystem. This mesosystem helps make connections between an individual's microsystems, therefore the teacher-student relationship can transform the development of both individuals (Bendro, 2006). Although schools may vary in needs, one thing that is constant is the value of relationship building between teacher and student no matter where you are located. By acknowledging that many new teachers do not feel prepared to work with at-risk adolescents, while also recognizing that teaching in the "real-world" is much different than they anticipated, University teacher preparation programs and educational leaders can proactively support new teachers by helping them flourish or acquire the relational competence skills that they may or may not possess. The data collected, and recommended solution will be shared with the organization and all individuals who participated in this study.

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## Appendix A

**Survey Part I: Demographic Information**

Item 1: I have completed this many years of classroom teaching: 0-5

Item 2: I identify as a: male or female

Item 3: I identify as this race: List of different races

Item 4: I currently teach at: List of educational institutions within school system

Item 5: University where teacher certification was obtained:

Item 6: At this moment in time, what percentage of your students do you believe live in poverty: List of percentages (0-10, 10-25, 25-50, 50-75, 75+)

## Appendix B

**Survey Part II: Teacher Relational Competence Scale: Individuality and Responsibility**

Item 1: I take into consideration that each student's thoughts, feelings, and understanding of a given situation may differ from mine.

Item 2: When a student behaves or expresses in an inappropriate or unsuitable way, I try to understand what lies under his/her behavior or words.

Item 3: I am open to student ideas and suggestions and I consider them when teaching.

Item 4: I take into consideration that each student experiences a given situation from a different perspective.

Item 5: As a teacher, I take full responsibility for the quality of the student-teacher relationship.

Item 6: I can effectively collaborate with every student or class.

Item 7: I am not insulted by students' inappropriate/offensive behavior or statements; I think of them as expression of imbalances between the student and myself/environment.

Item 8: When I can't build a good relationship with a student, I ask him/her for help.

Item 9: I am aware that each student has his/her own way of thinking and functioning, so I try to adjust my behavior accordingly.

Item 10: If I find myself in repeated conflicts with a certain student or a group of students, I consider my behavior and usually modify it accordingly.

Item 11: I see relationships with each student as an opportunity for my personal and professional growth.

## Appendix C

**Survey Part III: Teacher preparation, working with at-risk students, and potential retention/attrition rates of new teachers.**

Item 12: My University teacher preparation adequately equipped me to build positive relationships with at-risk adolescents.

Item 13: The relationships I have with my students are a major contributor to my professional and personal happiness.

Item 14: I had similar experiences in my own teenage years to many of the students I currently teach.

Item 15: I rarely think about another profession other than one in K-12 education.

Item 16: The majority of my students come from poverty.

Item 17: Teaching at-risk adolescents in the “real-world” is similar to how I thought it would be.

Item 18: I believe I will be a K-12 educator for more than 5+ years.

## Appendix D

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in a research study, entitled “Quantifying New Teacher Relational Competence with At-Risk Adolescents.” A doctoral candidate from Creighton University is collecting data on the self-assessment of new teacher relational competence. This relational competence is focusing on new teachers (0-5 years of professional experience) who work with at-risk adolescents. In education “at-risk” can be used as a catch all phrase, so for the purposes of this study at-risk adolescents will be those who come from poverty. The primary goal of this study to quantify if new teachers felt prepared by their University training to build relationships with at-risk adolescents, with a secondary goal of correlating new teacher retention/attrition rates based on the teacher-student relationship. Because you have 0-5 years of professional teaching experience, you have been invited to participate in this research study by completing the attached surveys.

The following questionnaire will require approximately 10 minutes to complete. There is no compensation for responding nor is there any known risk. In order to ensure that all information will remain confidential, please *do not* include your name. If you choose to participate in this project please answer all questions as honestly as possible. Participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse to participate at any time.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participating in this study. The data collected will provide useful information on the self-assessment of teachers and their unique experiences working with at-risk adolescents. Completion of the survey will indicate your willingness to participate in this study.

## Appendix E

**Participant Bill of Rights****As a participant in a research study, you have the right:**

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.
2. To refuse to be in the study at all, and to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.
3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.
4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.
5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.
6. To be told who will have access to information collected about you, and how your confidentiality will be protected.

## Appendix F

**IRB Approval**

IRB approval for [1196611-1] *Quantifying New Teacher Relational Competence With At-Risk Adolescents* was submitted on 02/08/2018 and was approved on 03/15/2018 with a project status of exempt by Creighton University. A consent waiver was also obtained by the Western Maryland public school system.