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## **The Impact of the Establish-Maintain-Restore Method on Teacher-Student Relationships in the Secondary Classroom**

Melissa Bauer

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The Impact of the Establish-Maintain-Restore Method on Teacher-Student Relationships  
in the Secondary Classroom

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Melissa J. Bauer

Saint Catherine University

St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this action research study is to assess the validity of the Establish-Maintain-Restore method for improving teacher-student relationships in a secondary setting. This study included 28 tenth grade students during their required religion course. Data was collected from students and the teacher to assess relationship quality over the course of the study. Data on overall relationship quality change was inconclusive in regards to student perception, but teacher perception of relationship quality did improve. This study has several implications for further research and action in the classroom, including the value of using individual conferences as a relationship building tool in secondary classrooms.

*Keywords:* teacher-student relationship, EMR method, secondary, conferencing

The day-to-day experience of a teacher at any level includes a wide variety of decisions, interactions and activities. Some of these moments are related to the direct instruction or evaluation of students, but other moments are dedicated to helping students develop in areas outside of academics. Teaching is about more than just test scores, identifying, teaching to and assessing objectives. In fact, some research shows that an overt focus on these instructional characteristics may even be detrimental to student learning and achievement (Li & Julian, 2012). If teaching should not only be about the activities that surround instruction, then another aspect must be about nurturing and shaping the person and the learner in the classroom. This aspect requires teachers to build relationships with their students.

The literature on positive teacher-student relationships suggests that meaningful teacher-student relationships have a positive impact on student learning and academic outcomes (Marzano, 2007; Scales et al., 2019). Some literature has also proposed that relationships with students are a critical component of student success mediated through increased motivation and engagement (Li & Julian, 2012; Marzano, 2007; Noddings, 1995). Establishing positive teacher-student relationships is also included in measures to evaluate overall effectiveness of teachers (Marzano, 2007; Stronge, 2008). The literature suggests that if teachers give special attention to their interpersonal relationships with students, students will have more positive social and school adjustments and improve behavior, engagement, and academic achievement.

A connection between teacher-student relationships and interactions with students in the primary grades would seem extremely clear given the sheer amount of time students in primary grades spend with just one teacher. In contrast, secondary

school students spend a limited amount of time with each teacher during the day and have more teachers overall (Roorda et al., 2017). While establishing positive relationships during childhood and the primary grades is certainly important according to the literature (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jeffrey et al., 2013), teacher-student relationships at the secondary level need particular attention as well (Duong et al., 2019). In fact, Roorda et al. wonder whether the warmth and care shown in teacher-student relationships at the secondary level might be even more important. A meta-analysis of 189 studies that included students from preschool to high school found that there was a stronger positive association between positive relationships and engagement in secondary school than in primary school (2017). It is clear that the role of teacher-student relationships in secondary schools is different than primary schools, but no less important in impacting student learning and success.

The literature supporting the importance and impact of teacher-student relationships is robust, but according to Cook et al., “there are few research-to-practice examples of how relationship practices can be operationalized and integrated feasibly and effectively into teacher professional development” (p. 227, 2018). Conceptually, teachers understand the value of positive relationships with their students, but often fail to proactively build these relationships (Duong et al., 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning goes even further to state that the various initiatives that have been undertaken to improve the classroom experience of students “are not sufficient to ensure that students make academic and social progress” because they do not incorporate training and professional development on positive interactions and relationships with students (CASTL). An evaluation of this

method and others like it that can be used by secondary teachers specifically is necessary to support classroom teachers and school staff in establishing and maintaining teacher-student relationships and ensuring quality teacher-student interactions.

The Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) Method developed by Cook et al. (2018) is one program that could fill this gap in teacher education and development. This action research project will utilize the EMR method to support teacher-student relationships in the 10th grade classroom and assess the promise of using the EMR method in high school settings.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The development and effects of teacher-student relationships can be considered from multiple angles. Whichever angle is considered, what remains clear is that from an early age, a child's relationship with adults is central to their development and future education (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jeffrey et al., 2013; Li & Julian, 2012; Noddings, 1995; Scales et al., 2019). The characteristics of these relationships can be understood through attachment theory, developmental relationships, and emotional objectivity.

The most prominent theory in the literature regarding teacher-student relationships is attachment theory, and it is very well supported in the literature. The way adults care for and attend to a child's needs during the early stages of life directly impacts how they view and interact with the world (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Li & Julian, 2012; Roorda et al., 2017). A child's attachment (i.e., either secure or insecure) can even predict that child's future success in a broad range of areas, including developing social-emotional skills that help children succeed in classrooms (Hamre & Pianta, 2001;

Tough, 2013). In a study that followed students from Kindergarten through eighth grade, Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that teachers are also crucial to a school-age child's attachment. Given the amount of time that students spend with their teachers, a child's attachment also becomes associated with the student's teachers and their caregivers (Cook et al., 2018). Teachers are responsible for educating a child in academic skills, but they are also responsible for supporting and nurturing the social and school adjustment skills that children will use to become successful in school later. Establishing these positive relationships occurs through positive and caring interactions between students and teachers to build trust (Cook et al., 2018; Marzano, 2007). Ultimately, students who demonstrate close relationships with their teachers adjust to school better, predicting future academic success for that student (Roorda et al., 2017).

Li and Julian support the use of attachment theory to understand a child's future academic success. However, they also suggest that a child's relationships with adults and their corresponding success go "beyond the connections of emotional attachment or connection" (2012, p. 158), particularly as they move through school and the broader community. Beyond attachment, Li and Julian propose a model of developmental relationships that adapt and change along with the child. These relationships involve balancing power between the adult and the child, reciprocity, and increasing complexity as befits the relationships. According to Li and Julian, a high-quality classroom is not dominated by teachers or students. Instead, the classroom achieves a delicate balance that correlates to building appropriate developmental relationships. To support developmental relationships and a proper balance, educators should work towards "the combination of *instructional support* and *positive climate*," which includes sensitivity,



feedback focused on learning and mastery and encouraging student responsibility (Li & Julian, 2012, p. 160). Li and Julian's conception of developmental relationships relies heavily on the zone of proximal development which is well supported in the literature and has a variety of applications (Vygotsky, 1978).

Marzano (2007) also identified teachers who had similar characteristics to the effective teachers in Li and Julian's work as effective teachers based on their relationships with students. These teachers were noted as having emotional objectivity and produced more significant achievement than teachers who did not display this characteristic (Marzano, 2007). When applied to the education setting, developmental relationships seek to support the classroom's instructional goals and establish a positive classroom climate with strong relationships between teachers and students (Li & Julian, 2012). Consistent with positive attachment, strong developmental relationships predict future student achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Li & Julian, 2012).

A final conceptualization of teacher-student relationships is provided by Cook et al. (2018) and brings together an attachment theory perspective and a transactional perspective of teacher-student relationships. Cook et al. (2018) developed a model for instructing educators on implementing an intervention called Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR). EMR emphasizes cultivating a sense of belonging through specific relationship-building actions, maintaining those relationships, and restoring communication when harm to the relationship occurs. In this method, attention is given to the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student. This addresses the importance of care and trust that characterizes attachment theory (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jeffrey et al., 2013; Noddings, 1995). The EMR method also gives attention to the

importance of building up a number of instances of positive interaction between the teacher and the student, consistent with a dyadic transactional approach (Cook et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019; Li & Julian, 2012; Roorda et al., 2017). A review of the literature will provide evidence for the consistency of the EMR method with prevailing theories about relationship development across grade levels.

### **Review of Literature**

The literature reviewed here makes it clear that investing in relationships is worthy of teachers' time and attention (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Li & Julian, 2012; Noddings, 1995; Roorda et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2019). Not only do strong, positive teacher-student relationships help students to adjust to school appropriately, they also support improved engagement in the learning process. To pay particular attention to the relationships they build with students, teachers need clear strategies and relationship practices to implement in their classrooms. Strategies to implement and support teacher-student relationships fall into two broad categories: meeting students' needs and providing assistance and support (Jeffrey et al., 2013; Li & Julian, 2012; Roorda et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2019). The EMR method includes both of these broad categories and provides practical action for teachers to undertake in their classrooms (Cook et al., 2018).

### **Establish-Maintain-Restore**

The EMR method developed by Cook et al. (2018) shares broad agreement with the current literature on the best methods to support teacher-student relationships. The first stage of the EMR method asks teachers to establish relationships and bank time with students who have not yet experienced a sense of belonging in their school or with

their teacher (Cook et al., 2018). In this case, the teacher is seeking to improve teacher and student perception of the relationship, which has positive impacts on both the actual relationship and student achievement (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Scales et al., 2019).

The Establish Phase is focused on the sense of connectedness a student has with their teacher and classroom primarily through individual time spent with the teacher. During this time, conversations are “nondirective, validating, and responsive to the student’s actions and feelings” (Cook et al., 2018). Here Cook et al. show agreement with the research done by Jeffrey et al. (2013) and Scales et al. (2019) where meeting students where they are at and making students feel valued were integral parts of improving the teacher-student relationship. There is also significant agreement about the importance of conversations with students as a way to build relationships (Jeffrey et al., 2013; Marzano, 2007; Roorda et al., 2017; Sprenger, 2020).

The second phase of the EMR method is to maintain the relationships that are established. During this phase, ongoing positive interactions are necessary and can be assured through intentional relationship practices (Cook et al., 2018). Here, a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions is recommended (Cook et al., 2017). These positive interactions can take the form of general or specific praise statements which will continue to support the necessity of meeting students’ emotional needs (Jeffrey et al., 2013; Scales et al., 2019). Teachers can also focus on demonstrating empathy when a student is upset or checking in with a student to see how they are doing (Cook et al., 2018). This relationship practice is consistent with the developmental relationships proposed by Li & Julian (2012), and the emotional objectivity recommended by Marzano (2007). Scales et al. (2019) also provides the insight that when students know that

teachers care about student success through continued assistance and support, there was an increase in the strength of the relationship and achievement.

While the primary goal of the Maintain Phase is to achieve a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions with students, negative interactions and conflict will undoubtedly occur in the classroom. The Restore Phase of EMR addresses intentional practices to resolve this conflict and repair relationships between teachers and students (Cook et al., 2018). Previous studies have suggested that negative relationships and interactions have a significant negative impact on student well-being, engagement, and success (Martin & Collie, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017). It is necessary, then, to restore the relationship to a positive state through specific communication and resolution strategies. Cook et al. (2018) suggest the use of one of five strategies that focus on empathy, communication, collaborative problem solving, and taking responsibility. These practices are supported by literature on restorative practices and relationship building with students (Marzano, 2007; Sprenger, 2020).

Cook et al. (2018) first studied this method with students in 3 elementary schools. This study included 220 students and 10 teachers in fourth and fifth grade. The teachers in the treatment group were given a brief training on the EMR method that included how-to scripts for the method as well as reminders and check-ins during the study. The results of the study indicated support for the EMR intervention when compared to the control group. Specifically, Cook et al. (2018) found that utilizing the EMR method resulted in a moderate effect on teacher-student relationships as measured by the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale-Short Form (STRS-SF; Pianta 2001). Focusing on teacher-student relationships also improved student behavior as identified by a

reduction of disruptive behavior and an increase in academic engaged time (Cook et al., 2018). Overall, preliminary support was indicated for the use of EMR at the elementary level, particularly the impact of providing training for teachers (Cook et al., 2018)

The EMR method was studied again by Duong et al. in 2019, but with middle school teachers and students, rather than elementary. Twenty teachers and 190 students were included in this study across grades six through eight. The training and support provided to teachers was the same as in the study conducted by Cook et al. (2018). In Duong et al. (2019), teachers also discussed their EMR method strategies and progress in professional learning communities. The study found a moderate positive effect on student-teacher relationships measured by the STRS (Pianta, 2001), increased academically engaged time, and a decrease in disruptive behavior when compared to the control group (Duong et al., 2019). This study confirmed that not only does the EMR method produce favorable results at the middle school level, but it is also a practical and cost-effective way for schools to implement intentional relationship practices for the purpose of improving the student experience and success (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). This action research study adopted key components of the EMR method studied at elementary and middle school levels, and applied the method to a high school setting.

### **Methodology**

This action research study was focused on the effect of the EMR method on teacher-student relationship quality after a teacher began implementing the method. The population for this action research study was tenth grade students enrolled at a private Catholic school in an urban area of the Midwest. The sample included 28 tenth

graders across two class periods during the second trimester of their required religion course. Overall, the students in the study included 15 males, and 13 females. This sample was generally representative of the sophomore class population. Of the 28 students, nine students already had established a relationship with the teacher from classes in a previous trimester.

To assess change in relationship quality over the course of the action research study, data was collected from both students and teachers in the form of a relationship quality questionnaire (see Appendix A) before the EMR method was implemented. Students were asked to complete this questionnaire during their regular class period, and with their teacher in mind. The questionnaire asked students to rate their teacher on a number of descriptors that would indicate the quality of their relationship with their teacher. This tool was used to determine the student's perception of their relationship with their teacher, and was adapted from the Key Measures included in a study performed by Scales et al. (2019). This questionnaire was administered to students at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of the study during their regular class period, and was anonymous.

The teacher version of the relationship quality questionnaire was completed by the teacher for each student participating in the study. Similar to the student version of the relationship quality questionnaire, the teacher version asked the teacher to rate their relationship with their student as represented by descriptors of teacher-student interaction (see Appendix B). This questionnaire was adapted from the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2002). The teacher completed the questionnaire for each student at the beginning, midpoint and conclusion of the study.

As the study began, the teacher was able to reference a list of actions and suggested prompts that fit within the EMR framework (see Appendix C). The collection of observational data in the form of a weekly log helped the teacher to record positive and negative interactions with students. This log also allowed the teacher to make note of important details that could be used to initiate conversation with students at a later time as part of the Maintain Phase of the EMR method. Throughout the study, students experienced a number of intentional relationship building strategies consistent with the EMR method in order to establish a connection between the teacher and the students (Cook et al., 2018). These strategies included but were not limited to: weekly check-in questions, positively greeting students by name, recognizing accomplishments, and providing positive acknowledgement or feedback.

Finally, individual conferences were held with students to allow time to inquire about interests and follow up on previously shared information between the student and the teacher. Open-ended questions were used to generate discussion between the teacher and the student, and reflective listening practices were used by the teacher in order to validate and affirm students' sharing. These conferences took place during a normally scheduled portion of the day when students are able to meet individually with their teachers. Students were invited to attend during their assigned time, but were not required to. All 28 students included in the study were invited to participate in an individual conference and 16 attended their conference. A post-conference reflection was collected to gauge the impact of conferencing on teacher-student relationships. Of the 16 students who attended their individual conference, 13 students responded. After

collection of data was completed over the course of the seven week study, the teacher reviewed the results to determine what conclusions could be drawn from the study.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The purpose of this action research study was to assess the impact of the EMR method for improving teacher-student relationships with high school students. The teacher implemented intentional relationship practices over a period of seven weeks in order to establish and maintain relationships with 26 students. Students were surveyed at the beginning, middle, and end of the intervention. The teacher then reviewed this quantitative data to determine change over time in matched sets of students. The teacher also completed a relationship quality questionnaire at the same intervals to determine change in teacher perception of relationship quality over time. Finally, students also participated in an individual conference with their teacher as a part of the EMR method, and qualitative data was collected from those students after the conference. Qualitative data was also collected from a weekly teacher log which was reviewed for themes regarding the teacher's experience of implementing the EMR method.

### **Change in Student Perception of Relationship**

The EMR method was initially presented by Cook et al. to fill a gap in ongoing teacher professional development regarding building positive relationships with students. The study done by Cook et al. looked at the change in teacher relationship quality over time (2018). The study represented here also examined the change in teacher student relationship quality over time, but in a sample of high school students rather than elementary or middle school (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). To



address this research question, the teacher administered questionnaires to students before, during, and after the implementation of the EMR method. This questionnaire addressed indicators of positive relationship quality and negative relationship quality.

To analyze change in student perception of relationship, a paired t-test for a difference in means was used. Students created anonymous identifiers that allowed the teacher to pair data from the pre and post-intervention questionnaire. To create a score of the teacher-student relationship quality, the mean was calculated for each student's responses across each item of the questionnaire (see Appendix D). The resulting value became the student's relationship quality score. Then, the mean of the student relationship quality scores was calculated from the pre and post-intervention questionnaires as seen in Table 1. The difference between pre and post-intervention scores was also calculated.

**Table 1**  
*Student Relationship Quality Questionnaire Data*

	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Difference
Mean	3.90	3.82	-0.08
Standard Deviation	0.41	0.58	0.38
p-value			0.173

*Note.* n=20 for both pre-intervention and post-intervention scores

For this t-test, the null hypothesis was that the difference in means was zero, indicating no effect of the EMR method. The alternative hypothesis was that the difference in means was greater than zero. A right-tail t-test with 19 degrees of freedom calculated the corresponding p-value for this t-test at 0.173. With an alpha value of 0.05, this result is not statistically significant. In fact, the data shows a slight overall decrease in relationship quality scores. The data had an approximately normal distribution and no

outliers, so this would not have impacted the results. Review of the complete data set of differences (see Appendix C) between the pre and post-intervention questionnaires revealed that some students actually experienced a negative change in relationship quality (i.e. overall relationship quality score decreased) and some students experienced positive change in relationship quality (i.e. overall relationship quality score increased).

### ***Positive Change in Relationship***

To assess whether the positive changes in relationship that some students experienced could be attributed to the implementation of the EMR method, an additional paired t-test was performed. Table 2 reviews the number of students who experienced a negative or a positive change in their relationship quality. Nine students experienced positive change in relationship quality of the 20 total students in the paired sample. In this case the null hypothesis was that there was no difference in relationship quality pre and post-intervention.

**Table 2**  
*Types of Relationship Quality Change*

Type of Change	Number
Positive Change	9
Negative Change	10

The alternative hypothesis was that the difference between pre and post-intervention scores was greater than zero. A right tail t-test returned a p-value of 0.02 as seen in Table 3. This value is statistically significant at the 0.05 alpha level, indicating that the EMR method did have an impact on the positive relationship change that students experienced.

**Table 3**  
*Positive vs. Negative Relationship Change*

	Positive Change	Negative Change
Number	9	10
Mean	0.22	-0.36
Standard Deviation	0.27	0.22
p-value	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.00029</b>

### ***Negative Change in Relationship***

The negative change in relationship that was experienced by some students was also analyzed for statistical significance. There were 10 students who had a lower relationship quality score on the post-intervention questionnaire, as seen in Table 2. In this case, the null hypothesis was that there was no difference between pre and post-intervention scores. The alternative hypothesis was that the difference between pre and post-intervention scores was less than zero, which would indicate a more negative relationship at the end of the intervention. As seen in Table 3, a left tail t-test returned a p-value of 0.00029, which is less than the alpha value of 0.05. This result is statistically significant, meaning that the EMR method did have a negative impact on relationship quality for some students. In this action research study, both the positive and negative changes in relationship quality that students experienced can be attributed to the implementation of the EMR method based on the statistical significance of their results.

### **Comparison to Post-Conference Data**

The results of the student relationship quality paired t-tests appear to be at odds with the data collected from the post-conference reflection. This reflection was collected from students who participated in individual conferences as a part of the EMR method.

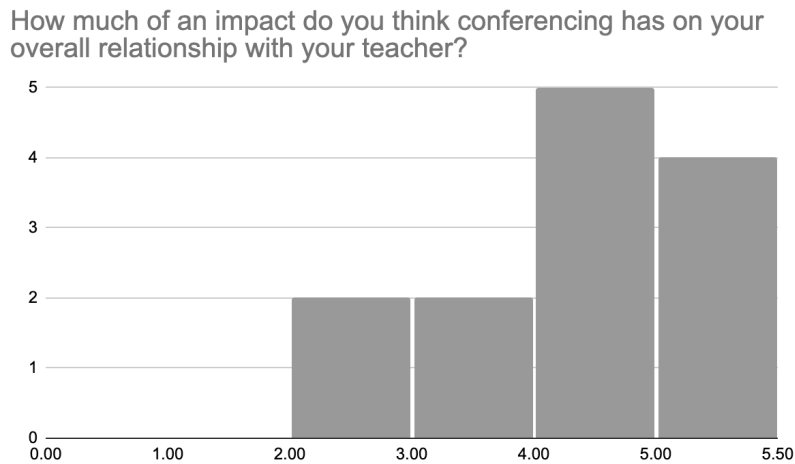
20 students completed both a pre and post-intervention questionnaire and 13 completed a conference and a reflection. In this reflection students were asked about their general emotional state, their experience conferencing with their teacher, and what kind of impact they believed conferencing had on their relationship with their teacher. A significant difference between the student relationship quality questionnaire and the post-conference reflection is that the former was anonymous while the latter was not. In both cases, completing the form was optional.

When asked to self-report the impact of conferencing on their relationship with their teacher, students reported an overall positive impact, as seen in Table 4. No student who completed the survey rated the impact of conferencing as being negative.

**Table 4**  
*Impact of Individual Conference on Relationship Quality*

Type of Impact	Number of Students
Positive	12 (92%)
Neutral	1 (8%)

Additionally, Figure 1 represents the extent to which students reported that conferencing with their teacher impacted their overall relationship. 11 of 13 (85%) students reported an average or greater impact of conferencing on their relationship with their teacher. All students reported at least some impact of conferencing on their relationship with their teacher.

**Figure 1***Histogram of Conference Impact on Relationship Quality*

*Note.* 1 indicates no impact and 5 indicates a substantial impact.

When completing their post-conference reflection, students also had the opportunity to submit their own feedback about conferencing and relationship quality with their teacher. Seven of 13 students indicated that the ability to have a one on one conversation with their teacher without distractions was a helpful part of the conferencing process, as seen in Table 5. While the results of the paired t-test for student relationship quality did not indicate an effect of the EMR method as a whole, the results of the post-conference reflection does indicate that there is a value to individual conferences with students, which is a component of the EMR method. Students considered conferencing an overall positive experience that did have an impact on their relationship with their teacher. Students were also able to identify which parts of the conferencing were helpful.

**Table 5***Individual Conferencing Feedback*

Themes	Number of Students	
	Helpful	Could be improved
1-1 conversation without distraction	7	2
Talking more about school	1	2
Talking more about interests/life outside of school	9	0
Being able to ask for help or support	0	0
Taking a break during my day	8	-
Having to take time out of my day	-	2

*Note.* n=13

### **Change in Teacher Perception of Relationship**

According to the literature (cite), a positive change in teacher perception of relationship quality can have a positive effect on student performance even when there is no change in student perception of relationship quality. To analyze change in teacher perception of relationship quality, a similar process to student perception of relationship quality was used. A relationship quality score was again created from the average of the responses for each student in the teacher version of the relationship quality questionnaire (see Appendix B). The resulting summary data from this questionnaire can be seen in Table 6. Because the teacher version was also administered before and after the intervention a paired t-test for difference in means could be used again.

**Table 6***Teacher Relationship Quality Questionnaire Data*

	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Difference
Mean	2.47	2.97	0.50
Standard Deviation	0.36	0.33	0.30
p-value			<b>0.000</b>

*Note.* n=26 for both pre-intervention and post-intervention scores.

In this case, the null hypothesis was that the difference between pre and post intervention scores was zero. The alternative hypothesis was that the difference between post and pre-intervention scores was greater than zero. In contrast to the student perception of relationship quality, Table 2 indicates that teacher perception of relationship quality did increase. To test the statistical significance of this observation, a right tail t-test was conducted with 25 degrees of freedom. This t-test resulted in a p-value of 0.000. At an alpha level of 0.05, this result is statistically significant, and the null hypothesis can be rejected. These results indicate that the EMR method did have a statistically significant impact on teacher perception of teacher-student relationship quality in this action research study. The findings of this quantitative data is consistent with the qualitative data collected from the weekly log recorded by the teacher.

### **Differences in Teacher and Student Perception**

Separate data compiled from teacher and student questionnaires revealed a difference in perception of relationship quality. To analyze whether or not this difference in perception was statistically different, a difference in means t-test was performed. In this case, the data was not paired data. The teacher and student versions of the relationship quality questionnaire contained a different number of positive and negative indicators, so the scores for positive and negative indicators needed to be separated out

in order to compare overall relationship quality scores. Table 7 shows the breakdown of relationship quality scores from post-intervention data for both negative and positive indicators.

**Table 7**  
*Perception of Relationship Quality Post-Intervention*

	Student Perception		Teacher Perception	
	Positive Indicators	Negative Indicators	Positive Indicators	Negative Indicators
Number	22	22	26	26
Mean	4.11	1.71	4	1.42
Standard Deviation	0.74	0.82	0.77	0.64

*Note.* Positive indicator scores closer to 5 indicate a more positive relationship. Negative indicator scores closer to 5 indicate a more negative relationship.

For both the negative and the positive indicators, the null hypothesis was that the mean of both teacher and student relationship quality scores were equal. The alternative hypothesis was that they were not equal, resulting in a two-tailed t-test. In each case, the resulting p-values (see Table 8) were not statistically significant at the 0.05 alpha level. These results indicate that there is not a significant difference in perception of relationship quality between teachers and students in this study.

**Table 8**  
*P-values for Positive and Negative Indicators*

	p-value
Positive Indicators	0.62
Negative Indicators	0.12



In summary, change in teacher perception of relationship quality, and both positive and negative change in student perception of relationship quality were statistically significant findings in this action research study. While statistical significance could not be assessed for the qualitative data collected from the post-conference survey, the results are meaningful for the teacher making reflective decisions in the classroom.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This action research study looked at the potential impact of using the EMR method to improve teacher-student relationships in a high school setting. Previous studies on the EMR method were conducted in fourth-grade, fifth-grade, and middle school settings (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). Over the course of seven weeks, the teacher implemented the EMR method with 10th grade students, and assessed student and teacher perception of relationship quality at the beginning, middle, and end of the study. After collecting and analyzing data, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Data supporting the use of the EMR method at the high school level was inconclusive. According to the data from the study, some students experienced positive change in relationship quality and some students experienced negative change.
- Conferencing with students is a positive and helpful intentional relationship practice.
- Implementation of the EMR method does have a positive effect on teacher perception of relationship quality with students.

### **Relationship Quality**

The most important conclusion to consider further is the actual impact of the EMR method on student perception of relationship quality. Of the 28 students included in the study, nine experienced positive change and ten experienced negative change (see Table 2). The change in relationship quality for each set of students was statistically significant. There are a number of potential explanations for why the resulting data from the study was conflicting and inconclusive. One reason data from students might have revealed a negative change in relationship quality would be any potential negative interactions with students. Redirection and discipline of students is a normal part of the classroom experience. If students had a recent experience of this that they responded negatively to, this could have skewed their responses to any individual relationship quality survey (Martin & Collie, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017). This may also indicate a need for more attention to the Restore Phase of the EMR method, which aims to repair any harm to the teacher-student relationship.

It is also important to note that nine students had already established a relationship with the teacher prior to the study due to courses taken in previous trimesters. Because the student relationship quality questionnaire was anonymous, it is impossible to know whether those nine students experienced more positive growth or negative growth in their relationship quality over the course of the study. However, the existence of a previous relationship with students remains an important confounding variable to consider. Finally, the timing of the study may have impacted results. At the beginning of the trimester, students are excited and curious. As students continue throughout the trimester, increased expectations from the teacher may impact the

perception of their relationship with their teacher. Performing this study over the course of multiple trimesters or a whole year with the teacher may yield different results.

Student perception of relationship quality was not considered in the initial EMR studies conducted by Cook et al. (2018) or Duong et al. (2019). Scales et al. did include an assessment of student perception of relationship quality in their study on teacher-student relationships and student motivation (2019). In this case, the study found that as student perception of relationship quality improved, so did their engagement, perception of school and environment and GPA. Student perception of relationship quality is an important factor to consider in future studies.

One result of the study that was consistent with previous work on the EMR method, was an increase in teacher perception of relationship quality. An improvement in relationship quality was supported by both quantitative and qualitative measures collected over the course of the action research study. Importantly, the qualitative data revealed that as the teacher experienced the positive results of establishing relationships with students, their motivation to continue intentional relationship practices increased. This particular finding is worth more exploration in future studies, especially as the long term use of the EMR method and other strategies is considered.

### **Individual Conferences**

Even though data regarding student perception of relationship quality was inconclusive, the study did reveal support for the use of conferencing as an intentional relationship practice. Individual conferences with students is a component of the Establish Phase in the EMR method. As defined by Cook et al., the goal of this phase is to cultivate a positive relationship with students through building a sense of trust,

connection, and understanding (2018). Because of the constraints of the high school schedule, conferencing was identified as a particularly important way to secure a window of time to spend individually with students (Martin & Collie, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017). The results of this action research study did indicate that individual conferencing with students was received positively, and that students found some positive benefit from this time spent with their teacher. Individual conferences also served as a motivating and energizing experience for the teacher involved.

The literature agrees that there is a gap in efficient and effective methods for training teachers in the implementation of intentional relationship practices (CASTL; Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). It is difficult to add one more thing to the tasks that a teacher has to complete in a day. However, individual conferencing is a suggested practice that can be implemented with relatively little disruption to a teacher's day. At the secondary school where the study was conducted, there is time built into the schedule to meet individually with students. Teachers should consider using this time to meet with students individually in an effort to know students and develop positive relationships with them. There is little to lose and much to gain from the experience of a one-on-one conversation with students about what interests and excites them.

### **Further Recommendations**

In order to fully assess the validity of using the EMR method in high school settings, further studies should be conducted. In order to collect data more representative of the school population, larger samples should be utilized. It may also be helpful to conduct the EMR method on a wider scale (i.e. involving more classroom teachers), and to have a designated support person at the school to remind and

motivate teachers to implement the EMR method (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). These studies should also begin to assess any relationship between teacher-student relationship quality, and academic factors such as increased engagement or motivation, and decreased disruptive behavior. The initial EMR method studies showed preliminary promise for improving relationships and student classroom behavior and should be explored further as it is well supported in the literature (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Martin & Collie, 2019; Roorda et al., 2017; Scales et al., 2019).

Any future research or studies should also endeavor to explore how best to train and support teachers in the implementation of strategies geared towards the improvement of teacher-student relationships. The EMR method is one tool that can be used to train teachers in developing positive relationships. This method requires more research across grade levels and settings, and other options should be explored as well. Teacher-student relationships are a valuable part of a student's education experience, and they have beneficial impacts on student performance. Time should be devoted to equipping teachers to meet the emotional and personal needs of their students in support of their academic success.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Student Relationship Questionnaire Items**

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*Note:* All questionnaire items were ranked on a scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always).

#### **Positive Indicators**

- My teacher really listens to me when I talk.
- My teacher has high expectations for me.
- When I have a problem at school, my teacher helps me figure out who I should talk to for help.
- My teacher takes time to consider my ideas when making decisions.
- I can tell that my teacher really cares about me.
- If I don't understand something in class, my teacher tries something different to help me understand it.
- My teacher shows concern for my emotional and physical well-being.
- My teacher displays an interest in and concern about my life outside of school.
- My teacher creates a supportive and warm classroom environment.
- I feel that my teacher treats me and other students fairly.
- If I need someone to listen to me, I know I can go to this teacher.
- I am happy with my relationship with this teacher.
- I enjoy attending this teacher's class.

#### **Negative Indicators**

- If this teacher is absent, I am relieved.
- I feel frustrated with this teacher at times.

## **Appendix B**

### **Teacher Relationship Questionnaire Items**

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*Note.* All questionnaire items were ranked on a scale from 1 (almost never/definitely does not apply) to 5 (almost always/definitely applies).

- This student values their relationship with me.
- When I provide positive feedback, they are clearly pleased.
- It is easy to be in tune with how this student is feeling and doing.
- This student easily shares information about themselves.
- This student openly shares their feelings and experiences with me.
- When I provide constructive feedback or redirection, the student reacts negatively.
- This student and I always seem to be struggling with each other.
- Dealing with this student is draining.
- When this student is in a bad mood, I know I am in for a difficult day.
- If this student is misbehaving or not on task, they respond agreeably to redirection.

## Appendix C Intentional Relationship Practices

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### Intentional Relationship Practices in the Establish-Maintain-Restore Method (Cook et al., 2018)

<u>Establish</u>	<u>Maintain</u>	<u>Restore</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a window of time to spend individually with each student to inquire about interests and validate who they are as a person using open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, and validation.</li> <li>• Gather, review, and reference (when appropriate) information about the student.</li> <li>• Positively greet using the student's name.</li> <li>• Find an opportunity to recognize or acknowledge students through compliments and second-hand compliments (e.g. I heard that you finally memorized your lines for the play!; I heard you scored the game-winning goal yesterday!)</li> <li>• Provide wise feedback (e.g. "I am giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aim for a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions with students</li> <li>• Send a positive note to students to acknowledge something the student said, did, or achieved in class. Consider sending a note home as well.</li> <li>• Continue to positively greet using the student's name.</li> <li>• Check-in on the relationship--brief interaction to see how things are going to check in about something specific that you know is important to the student (e.g. sport, club, test in another class, birthday, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally reconnect with the student to repair any harm that was done to restore the relationship back to its previous state.</li> <li>• Attempt to repair harm using one or more of the effective communication techniques:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Taking personal ownership for the negative interaction</li> <li>○ Deliver an empathy statement</li> <li>○ Letting go of the previous incident and starting fresh</li> <li>○ Communicating your care for having the student in class</li> <li>○ Engaging in mutual problem-solving (seeking input from the student) to jointly figure out how to avoid similar negative interactions in the future.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

### Appendix D Student Relationship Quality Scores Data

*Note.* A positive difference indicates a positive change in relationship quality. A negative difference indicates a negative change in relationship quality.

	Student Identifier	ALL05	AMY28	AND5	BEL25	CAT6	Chr26	COR9	GWE24	JAM30	JEN1	JOD29	KAT29	LAR25	LIS16	Mar03	MAR16	Mau20	nat27	Sar22	TAR23
Pre-Intervention		3.60	4.33	4.40	4.33	4.07	3.73	3.67	4.47	4.27	3.13	4.13	3.80	4.27	3.53	4.13	3.27	3.47	3.73	3.47	4.27
Post-Intervention		3.13	4.33	4.13	4.60	3.93	3.87	2.93	4.40	4.40	2.86	4.33	3.87	4.33	3.60	4.27	2.93	3.13	3.47	4.40	3.53
Difference		-0.47	0.00	-0.27	0.27	-0.13	0.13	-0.73	-0.07	0.13	-0.28	0.20	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.13	-0.33	-0.33	-0.27	0.93	-0.73