

**INITIAL FINDINGS OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND
UNDERSTANDING OF STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS**

by

Savanah Tribbe

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Savanah Tribbe

Greenville, NC

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Approved by:

Christy M. Walcott, PhD

Department of Psychology

Abstract

Student-Teacher Relationships (STRs) are a critical component of effective teaching and learning, contributing to student engagement, academic achievement, and teacher well-being. Despite its importance, little attention is given to STR-related skills in pre-service teacher education. This lack of preparation may leave future educators under-prepared to establish and maintain positive relationships with their students. The present study investigates pre-service teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and confidence regarding STRs to examine how teacher education programs influence their readiness for classroom practice. A qualitative, exploratory design was used through focus group discussion with education majors at East Carolina University. The questions were adapted from the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale*, prompting participants to reflect on strategies for student engagement, behavior management, and relationship-building. An analysis from the focus groups was used to identify recurring patterns across participant responses, highlighting both strengths and gaps in pre-service teachers' preparedness. Findings from this study provide insight into how pre-service teachers understand STRs and their perceived readiness to implement them in practice. By addressing these perspectives, this research will address the need for enhanced teacher education curriculum that prioritizes STRs as a foundational teaching skill. Improving pre-service teachers' preparation has the potential to create more supportive, effective, and inclusive classroom environments.

Introduction

Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships

Student-teacher relationships (STRs) are a crucial interpersonal connection within the educational environment, encompassing the dynamic between students and teachers. STRs evolve throughout the school year through a complex interplay of beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions from both teachers and students (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). These relationships serve as the foundation for the classroom environment and subsequent student learning. However, whether this relationship is positive or negative can be influenced by various factors. This may include elements such as conflict, closeness, dependency, reciprocity, communication, and involvement (Li et al., 2022). Importantly, the nature of the STR can influence how students perceive authority, approach challenges, and develop social-emotional skills over time. For teachers, these relationships provide insight into students' individual needs, enabling more responsive and effective teaching practices (Cristine et al., 2022).

A positive STR is built on mutual trust, respect, and effective communication, all of which create a safe learning environment that fosters increased student motivation, academic achievement, and teacher wellness (Lawson & Masyn, 2015; Dreer, 2023). Research has shown that when students feel cared for by their teachers, they tend to work harder, engage in more challenging academic activities, behave more appropriately, feel genuinely happy to see their teacher, and often meet or exceed their teacher's expectations (Li et al., 2022). In these cases, teachers are showing respect, being polite, and valuing students' individuality. STRs can have positive impacts by creating a successful classroom environment that is safe and welcoming for everyone (Cristine et al., 2022). Furthermore, research by Kristen G. Leaming (2020) at the University of Kansas revealed that the benefits of a positive STR extend well beyond the school

years. Leaming found that teachers who fostered a sense of worth, identity, self-acceptance, and confidence in the classroom helped students later pursue their dreams, realize their talents, and achieve self-actualization.

Teacher Preparation for STRs

Despite the well-known importance of STRs, a significant gap remains in how teachers in training develop these skills before entering the classroom. While pre-service programs tend to emphasize content knowledge and instructional strategies for the classroom, there is little focus on the knowledge needed to form and sustain a positive relationship with students (Pomerance & Walsh, 2020). A meta-analysis involving 47 studies found that 85.2% of teaching programs have specific attention on student behavior, while only 53.7% of programs focused information on teacher behavior. Furthermore, of these same programs, only 3.7% focused their programs on STRs (Korpershoek et al., 2016). This lack of preparation can leave new teachers under-prepared to navigate how they influence and adapt to the different needs of students in the classroom.

Much of the existing research focuses on the ability of teachers to build and maintain STRs (Bennett et al., 2023; Robinson, 2022). However, there is little attention paid to how those still undergoing teacher training understand and prepare for this critical aspect of their future practice. Exploring this area provides critical insight into whether teacher education programs are teaching future educators the necessary skills to practice in the classroom effectively. To address this gap, the present study explores pre-service teachers' knowledge and perceptions of STRs, with the aim of understanding how they anticipate applying these skills in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

Supportive teachers expect students to do their best, and they scaffold learning to help students achieve. A positive STR is felt when students feel a sense of connection with their

teacher, whom they perceive as supportive and caring. Although the importance of STRs is clear from the research, less is understood about how pre-service teachers are prepared for this part of their teaching role. This study explores how pre-service teachers understand STRs and how their training influences these perceptions. By examining the knowledge and perceived confidence of pre-service teachers, this research will shed light on whether current training effectively prepares these individuals to build and maintain positive STRs in the classroom. Addressing this gap could lead to improvements in teacher education, allowing future educators to develop a stronger understanding of STRs, and transition more smoothly from training to practice.

The research questions being investigated are:

1. To what extent do pre-service teachers believe that each student they encounter deserves a personal relationship with their teacher?
2. How knowledgeable are pre-service teachers regarding effective student engagement and relationship-building strategies?
3. How confident do pre-service teachers feel regarding their readiness to build and maintain positive STRs?

Method

Design

Because we found no previous research on pre-service teachers' readiness for STRs, we used a qualitative, exploratory method through a focus group meeting. Pre-service teachers are individuals who are currently in their internship and about to graduate with their degree in education. The qualitative approach allowed for researchers to learn participants' lived perspectives on their readiness to build STRs and how they would handle certain situations. This method was deemed appropriate for the early-stage of discovery about this topic, before we

develop a more comprehensive survey study. Focus groups can help gauge interest and get initial impressions of a concept (Morgan, 2019). The role of the focus group is to allow group interaction for participants to explore, clarify, and share individual perspectives, while allowing the collection of data through group interaction (Krueger 2014). The study used modified questions from the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale* (TSES) to address pre-service teachers' knowledge of STRs while allowing them opportunities to expand on answers and identify their needs, assets, and barriers to having quality STRs (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk 2001).

Participants

The study consisted of two pre-service teachers. One participant is a senior elementary education major at East Carolina University (ECU) and is currently in their internship with second grade students. The other participant is a senior elementary education at Coastal Carolina University (CCU) and is in their internship with third grade students. Both participants are graduating in December, and they both plan on a career in teaching.

Procedure

A focus group was created for pre-service teachers to understand their perspectives on STRs. They received information about the focus group through a recruitment flyer given out by email. It was held on Microsoft Teams for one hour so there was enough time for discussion of each question. When beginning the focus group, participants were informed that participation is voluntary, they can leave at any time, and confidentiality will be kept throughout the process.

The purpose of the survey is to clarify research and practice needs around teachers' readiness to build quality student-teacher relationships. Using open-ended interview questions within small focus groups, the interviewer asked pre-service teachers about their knowledge of student engagement and behavior management. Additionally, participants were asked about their

perceived readiness and confidence to build and maintain STRs. The focus group ended with an opportunity for participants to reflect and ask any questions they have related to focus group topics. The questions that were asked during the focus group can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Questions

1. In what ways would you foster relationships or connect with your students in the classroom?
 2. If you are having a difficult time reconnecting with a student, what are some strategies you would use to re-establish that relationship?
 3. What potential barriers could prevent you from establishing a strong STR?
 4. How would you motivate your students to be a good classroom citizen, ready to learn, and be well-behaved?
 5. What methods would you use to manage problem behavior among students in the classroom?
 6. Where did you learn how to establish STRs (personal experience vs. teacher education)?
 7. Have you learned specific interventions from training you want to use?
 8. Any other examples that help strengthen relationships?
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Data Management and Security

The audio recorded interview data was stored on the Principal Investigator's ECU-issued, password protected laptop located in 214 Rawl. When analyzing the interview transcript, the researchers used Word and other ECU software to identify themes. The Word file was kept in a

password-protected pirate drive folder. The Word file contains pseudonyms instead of the participant's given first names. Once the focus group data was coded, the original audio file was saved in a research folder on Dr. Walcott's ECU password-protected pirate drive for five years, after which it will be deleted from the pirate drive.

Data Analysis

The discussion from the focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of the data. A thematic analysis was used to examine the transcript and identify patterns that occurred within the participants' responses. This approach was completed by both focus group leaders where the transcript was read through and key words, phrases, and ideas were noted that reflected the participants' beliefs, knowledge, and confidence to build and maintain STRs. The reviewers then met to debrief their observations and reached a consensus on the main themes that emerged from the focus group discussion. This process emphasized agreement on the discussion of the three research aims, which provided framework for presenting and interpreting the findings.

Results

The focus group provided rich qualitative insights into pre-service teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and confidence regarding the creation and maintaining of STRs. A thematic analysis of the responses revealed recurring themes that reflect both shared values and individual variations in experience. Across both participants, a strong emphasis was placed on STRs as essential to student engagement and success. The results are presented below according to each research question and the themes that are supported by participants' perspectives.

Theme 1: Understanding Beliefs about Personal Connections with Students

Participants expressed a strong, shared belief that every student deserves a personal and meaningful connection with their teacher. They shared the idea that effective teaching extends beyond academic settings to encompass emotional support and relational trust. Participants emphasized the importance of getting to know their students through classroom practices like “get-to-know-you” activities, informal conversations during lunch, and discussing shared interests outside the classroom. The CCU student reflected that, “I learned so much just from them sharing what’s in their brain... just listening to them talk.” Similarly, the ECU student emphasized the importance of informal connection: “Eating lunch with them...they’ll ask you a hundred questions and tell you everything...but that’s how you really get to know them.” They also added that “actually getting on their level and treating them like equals...they open up a lot.” Furthermore, mutual respect and equality were frequently identified as critical foundations for build trust and engagement with students. Additionally, both participants highlighted the role of connecting with the family of students to strengthen these relationships, suggesting that understanding the student’s family enhances the depth of STRs. Collectively, these findings suggest that pre-service teachers view building a connection with their students as a core professional responsibility and having this knowledge is crucial for student success.

Theme 2: Knowledge of Student Engagement and Relationship-Building Strategies

Participants demonstrated a solid understanding of evidence-based and experience-informed strategies for fostering positive STRs. Specific strategies included the use of positive reinforcement systems such as Class Dojo and reward charts, cooperative learning structures such as Kagan structures, and social-emotional learning activities designed to promote empathy and self-regulation. The CCU student explained, “Sometimes they turn off the personable side of themselves...so I try to make learning fun, like naming different kinds of candy during science.”

The ECU student highlighted the effectiveness of positive reinforcement, noting that, “Dojo or reward systems really get them excited.” They also emphasize the importance of maintain consistent expectations in and outside of the classroom, using positive phrasing of classroom rules, and creating structured routines to support engagement and mutual respect. Despite this knowledge, pre-service teachers acknowledge several challenges that can hinder relationship-building with students, including authority conflicts, language differences, and inconsistent student attendance. These reflections indicate that while participants possess a strong theoretical and practical foundation, they remain aware of barriers that may require a different approach in practice.

Theme 3: Confidence to Build and Maintain Positive STRs

Pre-service teachers reported feeling increasingly confident in their ability to build and maintain positive relationships with students, primarily result of hands-on field experiences. While coursework provided during university education was provided as essential training, participants emphasize that in-person classroom interactions and mentorship from experienced teachers were the most significant contributors to their professional growth. The ECU student reflected that “Nothing really prepares you for the classroom other than actually being in it.” The CCU student agreed, adding that “combining what I liked and didn’t like as a student with what I learned in class has been really beneficial.” Both individuals described feeling prepared to connect with students and maintain STRs, though they acknowledged the difficulty of balancing authority and approachability with their students. The ECU student also noted that “even outside your internship, you still have more to learn...you learn even more new things as a beginning teacher.” Overall, participants’ confidence levels of STRs can be described as moderate to high, where they have the knowledge of university education and practice in the field. However, their

discussion from the focus group suggested that pre-service teachers perceive relational competence as a skill that evolves with continued exposure in the field, mentorship, and self-awareness.

Discussion

The present study examined pre-service teachers' understanding of STRs and their perceived preparedness to build and maintain these relationships in the classroom setting. Prior literature suggests that teacher preparation programs often prioritize instructional strategies over learning how to build a positive relationship with their students, resulting in insufficient development of relationship-building competencies among new teachers (Korpershoek et al., 2016; Pomerance & Walsh, 2020). However, findings from this study indicated that participants felt adequately prepared to build positive STRs. This demonstrates that these participants had high self-efficacy to connect with their students before entering the field, suggesting they may have had previous education on relational support with students and that field experiences have given them practice and confidence. Given that they are not yet experienced educators, it is possible that they overestimate their readiness for STRs and underestimate the challenges of maintaining and restoring relationships with difficult students.

Participants emphasized the importance of knowing students personally, establishing mutual respect, and creating trusting environments with their students. These beliefs align with research by Li et al. (2022) that positive STRs predict higher-quality instruction. As well as the idea that positive STRs are beneficial for student motivation, engagement, and emotional well-being, which is foundational for effective teaching. Furthermore, the present study's participants demonstrated an understanding of relationship-building strategies, including positive reinforcement, cooperative learning, social-emotional learning and consistent expectations.

These teaching strategies reflect Coristine et al. (2022) that intentional relational practices contribute to positive classroom environments and improved student outcomes. As new teachers, they reported confidence with building relationships and had practice in this area via field work. They spoke less of maintaining or restoring relationships, which are more nuanced relationship skills that come with more experience.

Participants viewed coursework as informative, yet they identified field experiences, like internships and interactions with mentor teachers, as the most influential contributors to their confidence in building STRs. While their coursework touches on student engagement and behavior management, pre-service teachers do not have an opportunity to practice building STRs until they are in the classroom. This emphasis aligns with Dreer's (2023) findings that teacher wellbeing and student relationships are interconnected. The more positive teacher wellbeing is linked to more positive STRs, effective teaching practices, classroom management, and instructional quality. These insights reinforce the need for preparation programs to create learning environments that strengthen both relational skills and teacher wellbeing, further supporting pre-service teachers' ability to build STRs.

Despite their confidence, participants acknowledged that continued experience in the classroom is necessary to refine relational skills. Further implying that preparation is ongoing, rather than fully developed prior to entering the profession. This reflects Hamre and Pianta's (2006) argument that STRs develop over time through authentic, repeated interactions, rather than through coursework alone. Their perspectives reinforce the idea that preparation for the classroom and building strong STRs is an ongoing process rather than a skill fully formed prior to entering the profession.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample was limited to two pre-service teachers despite several advertisements across various dates and times, which was less than we hoped to recruit for our focus groups. Focus groups are about quality and depth of answers, not a high quantity of participants; nonetheless, more focus group members would have ensured that we exhausted the topic area from various perspectives. Next, the data was based on self-reported reflections, which may reflect what participants believe they should say, instead of their actual skill level in the field. Although socially-desirable answers were a risk, the focus group leaders tried to convey an open conversation with no judgment about opinions discussed. Lastly, the focus group was conducted online, which may have limited the amount of discussion that occurred compared to face-to-face conversation.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study highlights both the value pre-service teachers place on STRs, and the different types of preparation they receive for developing these relationships in practice. Participants expressed a clear belief that STRs are essential for student success, but continued practice in the field is most influential to their learning. Future research should involve a larger, more diverse group of pre-service teachers, conducted in person, to encourage richer conversation about each topic. Next steps could use these findings to create a survey to assess pre-service teachers' STR-readiness. A subsequent longitudinal study could follow these participants responses after a few years in the occupation to compare their initial knowledge and their current ability to implement STRs effectively in the classroom. Ultimately, strengthening pre-service teachers' preparation for building meaningful STRs remains essential for fostering supportive, effective, and equitable learning environments.

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Appendix: IRB Approval Letter



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
 Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
 600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
 Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
 To: [Christy Walcott](#)
 CC:
 Date: 6/5/2025
 Re: [UMCIRB 25-000694](#)
 Focus Group on Teacher-Student Relationships

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 6/5/2025. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Flyer Revised(0.03)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Info Sheet Revised(0.02)	Consent Forms
TSES - edited.docx(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.