

SENSE OF BELONGING, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND TEACHER-STUDENT  
RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP: AN  
INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

by

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Sense of Belonging, School Climate, and Teacher-Student Relationships through  
Sustainable Leadership: An International Case Study

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Teacher-Student Relationships .....	TSRs
Colegio Bolivar .....	CB

## **ABSTRACT**

### **SENSE OF BELONGING, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP: AN INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY**

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This thesis explores the value school leaders place on teacher-student relationships as a sustainable leadership practice in an international school setting. Specifically, the following research questions guided this investigation: 1) What value do school leaders place on teacher-student relationships at Colegio Bolivar? And 2) How do leader practices influence the development of teacher-student relationships and the learning environment at Colegio Bolivar? The study of teacher-student relationships has been a prevalent topic of study for over three decades. There is a vast literature associating them with positive social and school factors for students. Still, gaps exist in the literature, particularly in international education and from a sustainable leadership perspective. The purpose of this study, then, was to investigate school leaders' behaviors likely to help create conditions for positive teacher-student relationships, ensuring their focus as a sustainable leadership practice.

The context of this study was a U.S. accredited K-12 school in Cali, Colombia that has a well-developed sense of community and belonging amongst its stakeholders attributed to positive interactions. At the school site, 10 school administrators completed a semi-structured interview regarding their practices as leaders. Twelve teachers also served on three separate focus groups to allow the capture of their perspectives of leadership practices as well.

The single case qualitative design allowed for conducting in depth conversations and analyses regarding the individual case in its actual context. Based on identified themes and findings it is easy to conclude that school leaders place a high value on TSRs at Colegio Bolivar. They take them into account in their hiring practices, student placement, and in their attempts of ensuring students' sense of belonging at school. Furthermore, it is something for which they explicitly check and provide resources for. So much of their organizational structure is based on the sense of community and belonging, making TSRs a key component of their identity.

As for the second research question, school leaders also ensure that all stakeholders' needs are met by ensuring they are heard, by providing them with autonomy in various facets of their teaching, and by ensuring that they feel valued and cared for. Additionally, administrators ensure they are consistently visible, constantly creating opportunities for others to interact with them whether it is for academic or non-academic matters. .

After careful analysis, the study yielded the following leadership recommendations: 1) be explicit about focusing on relationships; 2) focus on developing

people in order to achieve school success; and 3) ensure you are visible as much as possible. These findings have implications for practitioners at any level looking to enhance school climate. Additionally, there are also implications for future research in the intersection of teacher-student relationships, leadership approaches, and sustainability.

## CHAPTER ONE

Relationships between teachers and students have been an area of focus in the U.S. for decades. Studies have found significant associations between the quality of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) and students' behavioral issues, level of engagement in learning, social functioning, as well as academic achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Literature over the last thirty years has provided evidence that supportive and caring relationships in the classroom are crucial to the development of students in all learning environments (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Davis, 2003, Davis, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Some experts have even suggested that at least one relationship with a caring adult, not necessarily a parent, is perhaps the single most important element in safeguarding youth who experience multiple risks in their lives (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002). For many children, that adult is a teacher (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

For those who consistently associate positive school adjustment with warm interactions, positive teacher-student relationships matter a great deal (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Most people can remember at least one educator that had a deep impact on their learning. Whether it was their demeanor in class, their sense of humor, or their content knowledge and delivery, they managed to enhance our school experiences by striking an emotional chord. Acting as socializing agents, teachers are able to decrease behavioral issues, increase student engagement, instill self-motivation, develop emotional,

behavioral, and academic skills, and have a positive impact on students' academic achievement (Davis, 2006).

But what happens when those relationships move beyond the confines of the classroom? And how can those relationships be fostered school wide for a continuous period of time? I firmly believe teacher-student relationships have the ability to influence school climate, and that they do so at Colegio Bolivar in Cali, Colombia, the site where this study took place. However, factors at this institution seem to come together to form an ideal learning environment, one that revolves around a heightened sense of belonging and community, strong teacher-student relationships, promulgated by a leadership philosophy that is sustainable. Experiencing this underlying phenomenon firsthand is at the heart of why I pursued a career in education. It is only fitting that I now have an opportunity to dive deeper into the reasons behind the school's success. By doing so, I aspire to shed light on school and social factors that could be applied in other similar settings. Surprisingly, the topic of teacher-student relationships is hardly visible in research in international education (den Brok & van Tartwijk, 2015). I also did not come across any literature linking it to sustainable leadership in international schools. As a result, this study employed a case study approach, focusing on the experiences of principals and others in administrative roles. More detail on the methodology of this study can be found in chapter three.

### **Statement of Problem**

The educational culture revolving around accountability today has led to a narrowing of curriculum, a decrease in student-centered instruction, and the

disintegration of knowledge (Cohen-Vogel & McLendon, 2009). Unfortunately, change in education is easy to propose, difficult to implement, and nearly impossible to maintain. Pilot projects show potential but are rarely scaled up successfully. Technological novelties easily attract early supporters, but it is harder to get others to commit to the arduous task of system wide implementation. Beacon schools may outperform neighboring schools, but often at the expense of depleting neighboring schools of their best teachers and students. Large-scale reforms may achieve early results but often plateau shortly after. Extreme effort and pressure can lift underperforming schools' adequate yearly progress, but they quickly fall back into the failure zone once the pressure is off or the effort is drained (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Long lasting improvement that can be maintained depends on successful leadership. But making leadership sustainable is difficult as well. Charismatic leaders come and go, often times leaving a successor with big shoes to fill. Vast amounts of effort and time can be invested, but they are not inexhaustible. In the absence of sustained leadership and sustained work on continuing goals and initiatives, improvement is unlikely, while lurching from initiative to initiative and exhausting both personnel and programmatic resources is likely (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

For several decades, the principal has been purposed with the key role of school development (Fink & Brayman, 2004; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). However, after the educational reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s requiring a focus on instruction and student outcomes, school leadership research has converged on leadership for sustainable school improvement (Crawford,



2009). While the primary role of the principal is that of change agent within their learning organizations, it is easy to see that the type of school leadership required today in schools is very different and more complex than before (Brown, 2005; Fullan, 2008). According to Harris and Day (2003) “A new model of leadership is emerging, one that recognizes the limitations of an approach to organizational change and development premised upon the efforts of just one person” (p. 97).

Due to quick advances in technology, and as a result of globalization, the context for principals’ work today is undergoing unprecedented rapid change (Harris, 2008). At the same time, there has been an increasing public demand for higher levels of accountability for all students’ learning. This has resulted in greater pressure to meet imposed short-term goals as part of standardized reform. Unfortunately, it has also led to an increased rotation within leadership assignments (Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006). Oddly enough, this is not just happening in the public-school system in the United States. Accountability issues are found world-wide, including the private domain, which often does not feel the same arduous strain of public answerability. Nevertheless, according to Benson (2011), the average headship tenure in international schools is approximately 3.7 years. With most overseas international schools governed by a board of directors, which members are usually on two-year assignments, most school heads don’t survive two board rotations (Nagy & Nagy, 2018).

Being a principal is often viewed as dealing with overwhelming expectations (Chirichello, 2004). As a result, fewer teachers are showing an interest in pursuing principalships (Fullan, 2007). In addition, the escalating retirement rate of Baby

Boomers, as well as a number of principals choosing to retire early is diminishing an already dwindling application pool (Day, 2007). These unintended consequences ultimately will affect student performance. Contrary to popular trend, this study aimed at investigating the degree to which school leaders focus on teacher-student relationships as a sustainable leadership practice at an international school in South America.

Experiencing a high sense of community and belonging, and even retention, I was eager to uncover the factors influencing their success through a TSR lens.

### **The Need for Sustainability**

Educational reforms in the last decade and a half have seen the standards movement plunge to the depths of unsustainability, taking educational leadership down with it (Fullan, 2007). “The constructive and compelling idea of standards – that learning comes before teaching and that we should be able to know and demonstrate when learning has occurred – has degenerated into a compulsive obsession with standardization and a ruthless pursuit of market competition” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 9). Our overwhelming fixation with continuing to reach higher and higher literacy and mathematics standards within shorter time frames is exhausting our teachers and leaders. Not only is it making it more difficult to renew the resource pool from which outstanding educators are drawn, it is leading us to neglect vast tracts of children’s learning environments as our energies are constantly channeled away from teaching humanities, health education, the arts, and other vital subjects (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

As we begin to encounter urgency of having to think about and implement sustainable practices in many areas of our lives, including business and the environment,

we should address the necessity to do the same within education. To borrow from renowned naturalist and environmental activist Jane Goodall, “it is a time to curb the hunger to consume and to recognize that our appetite is causing extinction” (as cited in Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 2). As with environmental practices, we too seem to be depleting our natural resources beyond the point where they can be renewed, undermining the foundations and diversity of our learning ecosystems. Public education should not be treated as a temporary business where creative accounting regarding test results aims to produce quick returns and never-ending profits. Instead, “as a near universal process that shapes the generations of the future, education should be treated as one of the most long-lasting enterprises of all” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 9). Learning lies at the very center of a high-quality life. Sustainability therefore is not simply a symbol to be adopted from business or environmental science, but a fundamental principle for elevating and conserving the richness and interrelatedness of all life.

### **Sustainable School Leadership**

First coined in the environmental field, Lester Brown (1981) defined a sustainable culture as one that can satisfy its needs without lessening the opportunities of future generations to meet theirs. A similar definition for sustainable development exists in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development from 1987, which states “Humankind has the ability to achieve sustainable development – to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The United Nations Conference on Environment and

Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the United Nations summit in Johannesburg in 2002 repeated the idea of sustainable development and translated this agenda into a set of more practical goals (United Nations, 2002).

Despite the different terms regarding sustainability, its core concept is developing and preserving what matters, spreads, and lasts in ways that do no harm to others now or in the future. In education, Fullan (2005) defines educational sustainability as “the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (p. 9). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) expand on that by stating “Sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future” (p. 17).

### **Rationale and Research Questions**

As the basis of this study is the assumption that there are known essential components that promote sustainable leadership for school improvement. These components (such as having a vision, building internal capacity, distributing leadership, and creating internal accountability) have been researched and confirmed as contributing to sustainable leadership for school improvement (Fullan, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, Davies, 2007; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Based on the Seven Principles of Sustainability postulated by Hargreaves and Fink (2003, 2004, 2006), the primary purpose of this study then is to investigate school leaders perceptions of essential components of sustainable leadership and how their school’s long history of positive

teacher-student relationships has influenced leadership for school improvement. The research questions for this study include the following:

1. What value do school leaders place on teacher-student relationships at Colegio Bolivar?
2. How do leader practices influence the development of teacher-student relationships and the learning environment at Colegio Bolivar?

### **Significance**

According to Fullan and Sharratt (2007), “there are very little direct data available in the literature on what leaders in given systems think about in relation to the concept of sustainability” (p. 125). While more research has been completed within this area in recent years, no research that I found focused on leadership teams in international schools. This study then has the potential to significantly contribute to the understanding of theory and practice, as a team of school administrators shares their perceptions of essential components that contribute to sustainable leadership for school improvement within a unique educational setting. Their responses may support or counter the prominent essential components set out in the existing literature. However, based on their unique setting, various cultural and social influences, and the fact that the focus is on a team of principals as opposed to just one administrator, their responses may put forward additional essential components that contribute to principals’ success within such contexts. Not only may this study be especially informative to the school where it is being conducted, but to similar schools within the country and/or neighboring countries.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Distributed leadership.** Distributed leadership has been defined as “a web of leadership activities and interactions stretched across people and situations” (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006, p. 46). Harris (2008) also defines it as “the organizational circuitry that will ensure the fast flow of innovation and change” (p. 74). For the purpose of this study, administrators will be asked to share evidence of how leadership focused on instruction is being distributed within school and between its stakeholders.

**Adaptive change.** According to Fullan (2005), adaptive change refers to addressing problems when one is not fully aware of their solutions. For the purpose of this study it is important to highlight the current pace of change in the educational landscape and how schools adapt to ongoing fluctuations, particularly as a school that self-imposes accountability.

**Capacity building.** Defined by Fullan (2005), capacity building refers to “developing the collective ability – dispositions, skills, knowledge, motivation and resources – to act together to bring about positive change” (p. 4). Participants in this study will be asked to share their perceptions of how they develop their staff to collectively improve student success.

**Teacher-student relationships.** Teacher-student relationships (TSRs) have been defined as “the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other” (Wubbels et al., 2014, p. 364). For the purposes of this study, administrators will be asked how they explicitly witness the benefit of teacher-student relationships, and how that has affected their leadership practices regarding

school improvement. Principals will also be asked to compare TSRs at previous schools in which they have worked.

**Essential components of sustainable leadership.** According to Dempster and MacBeath (2009), essential components are the main approaches implemented by leadership that lead to the development of a deep understanding of learning, foster a stimulating learning environment, and are accountable for student outcomes, both professionally and publicly. While this definition is somewhat encompassing, principals will be asked to share their views of essential components of sustainable leadership regarding school improvement.

**School improvement.** Hopkins (2001) defines school improvement as a distinct approach to educational change that aims to enhance student outcomes as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. Barth (1990) defines school improvement as "an effort to determine and provide, from within and without, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among them" (p. 45). Based on these definitions, the purpose of school improvement is to impact the relationship between the teaching and learning process and the conditions that support it. School improvement, therefore, should not merely reflect an implementation of policies, but improvements or adaptations of practice that transform the learning process (Hargreaves, 1994). For the purposes of this study, principals will be asked how they perceive the leadership philosophy at school involves teacher-student relationships as a sustainable practice for school improvement.

**School leadership.** According to Leithwood and Riehl (2005), school leadership is defined as “the work of mobilizing and influencing others to articulate and achieve the school’s shared intentions and goals” (p. 14). In regards to this study, this definition will not be limited to the principal for each school section, but will encompass those addressed by principals as having a leadership role.

**Sustainable leadership.** As stated before, “sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 17). Furthermore, “Sustainable leadership is made up of [essential components] that underpin the longer-term development of the school. It builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose which provides success that is accessible to all” (Davies, 2007, p. 2). For the purposes of this study, leadership will be considered sustainable if it addresses the majority of the Seven Principles of Sustainability postulated by Hargreaves and Fink (2006), which is highlighted in chapter two of this dissertation.

**School climate.** According to the National School Climate Center (2007), school climate is defined as “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.” Furthermore, the NSCC breaks down school climate into the following five dimensions: (a) safety, (b) relationships, (c) teaching and learning, (d) institutional environment, and (e) school improvement process. For the purposes of this study, interviews with participants will focus on dimensions b, d, and e.



**School culture.** While often times used synonymously with school climate, school culture deals with the distinctive set of values, attitudes, and conducts, created by all stakeholders of an institution, which become characteristic of the school as a whole (Gaskell, 1995). For the purposes of this study, participants will be asked what role relationships play in establishing a school culture.

**Learning environment.** Not only referred to as the diverse physical locations in schools, learning environment also refers to the contexts and cultures in which students learn (Bates, 2014). Since students may learn in a wide variety of settings, the term is often used as a preferred alternative to classroom. The term also encompasses the culture of a school, its presiding philosophy and characteristics, including the interactions between individuals, as well as the ways in which educators organize an educational setting to enable learning. For the purpose of this study, administrators' actions towards improving the learning environment will be taken into account, particularly as they relate to teacher-student interactions.

**Moral purpose.** According to Fullan (2001), moral purpose is acting with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of students. By definition, sustainability is a moral concept and a moral practice. For the purposes of this study, moral purpose will include making a difference in the day-to-day lives of students, particularly taking into account teacher-student relationships.

## **Conclusion**

It is problematic that in education today, accountability and standardization characterize the goal orientation of schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Because of this,

students' instruction is not properly preparing them for the kinds of roles they will be entering when joining the workforce. While sustainable leadership does not discredit progress or educational trends, it does call for our conscientious efforts in recognizing the benefits of implementing what works and not just what is popular. The conscious or subconscious effort to focus on the quality of teacher-student relationships goes hand in hand with sustainable practices. Future research at the intersection of these two concepts will help illuminate ways in which leadership approaches could be tailored to best meet students' needs and a school's mission and vision. Making teacher-student relationships a core tenet of a school's leadership philosophy not only ensures sustainability, but allows for communal buy in to a key practice that transcends any one individual or leader.

## CHAPTER TWO

In this chapter, I will begin by explaining my method for reviewing literature, which provided the theoretical foundation of my study. Subsequently, I will examine and synthesize the literature foundations that support my conceptual framework: 1) instructional and transformational leadership; 2) teacher-student relationships; 3) school climate/culture; and 4) sustainable leadership. The associations between these literature foundations are reflected in my research questions, which include: (1) What value do school leaders place on teacher-student relationships at Colegio Bolivar? and (2) How do leader practices influence the development of teacher-student relationships and the learning environment at Colegio Bolivar? By surveying them independently and in conjunction with one another, I aim to showcase how the purpose, methods, and procedures of this study emerged. Situated within the combination of these respective fields, my goal was to uncover meaningful findings that expand on prior knowledge.

### **Literature Search Process**

The topics mentioned above have been searched using multiple sources of information. Initially, databases such as Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, JSTOR, and ERIC were used. My search terms have included, but were not limited to “effective leadership”, “teacher-student relationships”, “academic achievement”, “sense of belonging”, “student success”, “sustainable

leadership”, “sustainable leadership in international education”, “positive school climate”, and “sense of community.” As I began compiling literature, I also used the reference sections of relevant articles to expand my search. Close attention was paid to authors cited in multiple articles. I also utilized research articles assigned throughout my coursework, particularly if they pertained to seminal pieces in any of my research topics. By filtering through each area of focus, I was able to determine when I had reached saturation and when I needed to conduct further research. This process allowed me to make connections between the literature and identify a gap I found worthy of study. The review of this work is presented in the remainder of chapter two and sets the groundwork for my proposed study outlined in the following chapter.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For close to 40 years, researchers have been questioning the effects of school leadership on students’ academic achievement (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982). During this time, two ways of thinking have prevailed – instructional leadership and transformational leadership (Hallinger, 1992). Developed in the 1980s, instructional leadership viewed the principal as the primary source of educational expertise. With the goal of making effective teaching the standard practice, the principal’s role was to maintain high expectations for teachers and students, supervise classroom instruction, coordinate the school’s curriculum, and monitor student progress (Barth, 1986).

On the other hand, transformational leadership came into play when the hierarchical orientation of instructional leadership conflicted with the newfound democratic and participative organization of schools that emerged in the 1980s.

According to Hallinger (1992), transformational leadership aims at improving organizational performance by focusing on problem finding, problem solving, and collaboration with stakeholders. To increase the collective capacity of a school, transformational leadership seeks to increase participants' buy in to the greater good (Bass & Avolio, 1993). However, while transformational leadership affirmed the centrality of the principal's role in innovating and shaping organizational culture, it lacked the explicit focus on curriculum and instruction (Conley & Goldman, 1994; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Robinson et al., 2008). While neither of these approaches embraces the other, some would argue that they are complementary (Marks & Printy, 2003; Day et al., 2016). At the core of this study is focusing on how a small leadership team in an international school in South America has successfully adapted components of both approaches in a unique setting in order to effectively sustain leadership over time.

### **Conventional Instructional Leadership**

The conventional instructional leadership literature emphasizes teaching and learning aspects of school leadership, generally concluding that a strong, directive principal, focused on curriculum and instruction, is essential for effective schools (Hornig & Loeb, 2010). Murphy (1988) narrowly defines instructional leadership as the focus on functions directly related to teaching and learning. More broadly viewed, instructional leadership also refers to other factors that contribute to student learning, which include management actions (Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990). According to Sebring and Bryk (2000), instructional leadership comprises everything a school leader does on a daily basis to support student achievement and teachers' ability to teach. In a review of

instructional leadership literature, Murphy (1990) later denoted that educational leadership could be directly and indirectly linked to successful teaching and learning. While reviewing cases that mostly represented conventional instructional leadership, as opposed to a shared form of it, he highlighted four areas of focus to influence education: 1) advancing the school mission and objectives; 2) coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating instruction, assessment, and curriculum; 3) promoting an ideal learning climate; and 4) creating a supportive atmosphere in which to work (Murphy, 1990).

Unfortunately, the conventional view of instructional leadership has often been criticized as outdated, patriarchal, and reliant on teachers with a passive attitude (Sheppard, 1996). The argument arose that if teachers are professional and proficient, then conventional instructional leadership was not fitting. Rather, principals should promote teacher autonomy, empowering them to be responsible for instructional matters (Senge et al., 2000). By distributing decision-making opportunities to those most familiar with the needs of students, one would not only be promoting what's best for children, but also empowering those responsible for teaching them.

### **Shared Instructional or Distributed Leadership**

Instead of looking to the principal alone for instructional leadership, shared leadership or distributed leadership aims to develop the leadership capacity among all members of the school community. According to Kohm (2002), one administrator can no longer serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators. Shared instructional leadership is an inclusive model, well suited for engaged and capable teachers. While the principal still remains the

educational leader of the school, teachers, who have content knowledge and pedagogical expertise, practice leadership collectively with the principal. Therefore, the principal assumes more of a facilitator role in teacher growth, than an assessor of their competency (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Because of this, shared instructional leadership has reshaped how teachers are supervised, and how they collaborate (Blase & Blasé, 1999). Often times, teachers are responsible for their instructional improvement, as well as professional development. This has led to teachers grouping together based on inquiry preferences, encouraging one another towards answers for instructional problems. Leadership for instruction then arises from both teachers and principals, with principals often discussing alternatives rather than imposing their personal views on teachers. Where principals seem to encounter the most success is when they actively contribute to these communities, not only by providing resources and expertise, but also the opportunity to reflect. According to Blase and Blase (1999), teachers are more prone to implementing innovative techniques, report more positive changes to their instruction, and are willing to take risks when they engage in constructive discussions with principals.

Teachers and principals are both responsible in shaping an effective leadership dynamic. Principals not only need to actively support and provide opportunities for teacher growth, teachers themselves must take advantage of the opportunities given (Blase & Kirby, 2000). Therefore, shared instructional leadership is not contingent on title, but on resources and the interaction of stakeholders surrounding those resources.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Originating from the work of Burns (1978), transformational leadership describes a leader's ability to engage with stakeholders in ways that instill a heightened sense of energy, commitment, and purpose. This involves leaders ensuring members are more interested in the group and less interested in themselves. According to Griffith (2004), the way transformational leaders build group commitment to common goals is through interpersonal relationships, appealing to general psychological and moral needs. These needs may include goodness, duty, responsibility, appreciation, independence, and purpose (Bass, 1990). By doing so, transformational leaders raise the communal consciousness about the importance of organizational goals. Four general ways in which leaders can exhibit leadership factors in this theory include: idealized influence, encouraging motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized attention (Marks & Printy, 2003). Transformational leaders may challenge expectations for pedagogical quality, they may ask teachers to reassess their assumptions and ways of thinking, and/or they may encourage and support the professional growth of teachers.

Furthermore, in evaluating the effectiveness of transformational leaders in schools, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999), have identified three clustered areas in which leaders have an effect. They include (a) mission, (b) performance, and (c) culture. This correlates with Murphy's previous work on conventional instructional leadership, and his four areas of focus to influence education, which also speaks to developing a commonly shared vision, holding high performance expectations, and building a collaborative school culture.



However, successful leadership is more than just combining these two types of approaches. A school's ability to improve and sustain effectiveness over time is not primarily the result of a principals' leadership style. Instead, it stems from an understanding of the school's needs and an application of shared educational values important to all stakeholders (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). It also takes into consideration the context and culture in which the school is located. While research exists to support both sides of the debate on which style is more effective (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Witziers, Bosker, & Kruger, 2003; Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016), several of the most commonly supported models of successful educational leadership actually include many of the same practices (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). While not advocating for the superiority of either, I instead treat them as a false dichotomy; recognizing they both play a large role in generating a positive learning environment. At Colegio Bolivar, however, the site of this study, there seems to be something more pervasive to its success than leadership styles. It was hypothesized that their emphasis on positive school climate, a heightened sense of community, and interpersonal relationships has been the foundation for their sustained success over time, with positive relationships with students and teachers being at the core of this philosophy.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

According to Pianta (1999), a wide and diverse array of theoretical and methodological traditions have been engaged in the effort to study teacher-student relationships (TSRs). Initial studies included Connell's descriptions of children's sense of relatedness (1990), Goodenow's sense of belonging (1993), Battistich, Solomon,

Watson, and Schaps' caring community (1997), Wentzel's pedagogical caring (1998), and Pianta's positive teacher-child relationship (1999). Over the decades, studies continue to significantly associate student's behavioral issues, level of engagement in learning, social functioning, as well as academic achievement with the quality of teacher-student relationships (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011).

As the basis of many studies focusing on the quality of TSRs is the theory of attachment, or extended attachment perspective. According to Bowlby (2005), the main idea behind attachment theory is that children's feelings of security derive from the relationships with their parents or significant others. Emotional reassurances from these relationships serve as a precursor to explore new environments. Teachers are then seen as a secure base from which students can engage in learning activities as they explore their classroom and school setting (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Certain variables from the TSR allow students to develop key social, behavioral, and self-regulatory competencies.

Several reviews and meta-analyses have demonstrated that the quality of relationships in classrooms is related to both cognitive and affective student results. In his 2007 meta-analysis, Cornelius-White revealed a considerable association between teacher variables and student outcomes. The factors that served as his independent variables were empathy, warmth, genuineness, nondirectivity, higher order thinking, encouraging learning/challenge, and adapting to individual and social differences. In addition to these independent variables, Cornelius-White included 18 dependent variables, 9 of which were cognitive dependent variables and 9 that were affective or behavioral dependent variables. Overall, his meta-analysis of his teacher-centered

independent variables had “an above average finding-level association with positive student outcomes” (Cornelius-White, 2007, p.130). Cornelius-White reported an overall standardized correlation of .31, suggesting that higher student achievement was linked to stronger student-centered relationships. Specifically, the highest links were found for the teacher variables of non-directivity ( $r = .35$ ), empathy ( $r = .32$ ), and warmth ( $r = .32$ ). His results, synthesized with teacher behaviors on student outcomes, showcased slightly higher effects on affective outcomes than on cognitive ones.

Inspired by Cornelius-White’s results, Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort’s 2011 meta-analysis of the affective dimensions of TSRs had a similar approach, but narrowed their use of independent variables. Different from previous meta-analyses, Roorda and colleagues concentrated on the affective dimension of relationships between teachers and students. Teacher variables were narrowed down to warmth and empathy, as they were hypothesized to be more strongly associated with student outcomes than other teacher variables. The student outcomes or dependent variables they selected in their study were student engagement and student achievement. Authors anticipated stronger associations with engagement than with achievement since engagement has been found to act as a mediator between TSRs and achievement. Based on 99 studies from preschool to high school, their analyses showed significant associations between their independent and dependent variables. The associations of TSRs with academic achievement and engagement were substantial overall. Associations of both positive and negative TSRs were medium to large regarding engagement, whereas associations were small to medium regarding achievement. Still, the authors concluded that while affective TSRs are

important, they are not sufficient to improve students' learning behaviors as there are many other teacher factors that also influence engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). Nevertheless, they suggest that the affective quality of TSRs could be used as a starting point for promoting school success.

In addition to individual teacher variables being identified through large meta-analyses carried out in this field, McCombs (2003) also states that classroom climate is an additional variable that significantly predicts student motivation and achievement. His findings are in line with Osterman (2000), who documented the importance of students' feelings of belonging to their class and their school. Apart from incorporating high levels of empathy and warmth, Osterman argues that teachers could see additional benefits to the TSR if they also focused on enhancing students' sense of belonging in their classroom. Additionally, Dobransky and Frymier (2004) contend that increased levels of trust in the teacher-student relationship correlate with higher self-reports of student learning.

Initial work even focused on the level of teacher experience in regards to teacher-student relationships. However, according to Stuhlman and Pianta (2001), and Wentzel (2003), there is little relation between teachers' level of education and experience and the quality of the relationship reported by teachers and students. More influential to the development of supportive relationships in the classroom are teacher's beliefs and perceptions of their students, and also their roles as educators. There is abundant research stressing the importance of teachers caring for their students and believing that students can learn by having high expectations of them as learners (Barr & Parrett, 1995).

Numerous studies suggest a connection between teacher beliefs and how they teach or fail to teach children (White-Clark, 2005). The relationship between a teacher and a student, therefore, is the foundation upon which learning rests. That being said, leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016).

For many students, their successes or failures are somewhat dependent upon the relationships they develop with their teachers. As Kohn (2006) suggests, most children do not fail due to their cognitive abilities, but because they feel detached, unwelcomed, or alienated from significant others in the educational environment. Effective educators demonstrate that they care about their students, making students aware of it. In response, children can feel securely attached to a significant adult. Such relationships foster achievement, autonomy, curiosity, self-direction, empathy, and even altruism (Brendro, Brokenleg, & VanBocken, 1990).

As Pianta (1999) suggests, “No amount of focus on academics, no matter how strong or exclusive, will substantially change the fact that the substrate of classroom life is social and emotional” (pp. 170). If students are to learn, they must first feel socially and emotionally secure in their instructional environment. A fundamental assumption of quality education is that children have a safe place to learn (Heim, 2007). According to Borba (1989), students generally feel secure in classrooms if they feel they can trust and depend on the teacher. Children must feel safe to make mistakes, in both learning and in behaving. Enjoying positive supportive relationships with teachers is essential to classroom success (Sornson, 2001). However, while teacher-student relationships have

been an area of focus of researchers in the U.S. for decades, they have heavily relied on one theory as the basis of their work. Highlighted below are three theories that inform my conceptual framework of teacher-student relationships and that seem to be highlighted in the site where I conducted my study.

**Attachment perspective.** As stated before, the basis of many studies focusing on the quality of teacher-student relationships is the theory of attachment. Although the conceptual framework for teacher-student relationship literature originates from numerous lines of research within education and psychology, attachment theory has perhaps been the most influential to its original framework (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The idea that relationships between children and adults are central to the development of children is largely derived from findings that attachment between children and parents strongly influences children's development (Sroufe, 1983). Key components and mechanisms needed to form high quality relationships with teachers derive from the broad constructs used to define children's attachment quality. This framework is instrumental in providing the basis for understanding how children form working models of attachments based on their early experiences with caregivers. Naturally, due to this prevailing theory, most studies concerning the teacher-student relationship were initially conducted at the early childhood, or early elementary level.

Based on the work of psychologists such as Lorenz, Harlow, and Bowlby, Ainsworth (1978) was able to delineate three different levels of attachment, studying early interactions between mothers and children through the use of her *Strange Situation Procedure* (SSP, 1971, 1978). As suggested by its name, the strange situation was

designed to present children with an unusual, but not overwhelmingly frightening experience. When a child undergoes this procedure, researchers are interested in two things: (1) how much the child explores the room on their own, and (2) how the child responds to the return of their mother. Situated behind a two-way mirror, Ainsworth conducted observations on over 100 participants in her initial experiment. The levels of attachment she defined included secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and ambivalent or resistant attachment. Securely attached children comprised the majority of the sample in Ainsworth's studies. Such children feel confident that the attachment figure will be able to meet their needs. They use the attachment figure as a safe base to explore new environments yet seeking their comfort in times of distress (Ainsworth, 1978). Children with a history of secure attachments to their caregivers have shown to function well throughout childhood and adolescence in a variety of life domains, including peer relations, school performance, and the establishment of healthy relationships with nonfamilial adults (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Educational researchers confirm that secure attachments function as an anchor, allowing children the freedom to explore and to engage constructively in activities and interactions with others (Pianta, 1999).

For children characterized as avoidant, Ainsworth noted that they are very independent of their attachment figure both physically and emotionally. These children do not seek contact with the attachment figure in times of distress. Ainsworth (1978) concluded that such children likely had a caregiver who was insensitive and rejecting of their needs. Furthermore, the attachment figure is likely to withdraw when helping during difficult tasks and may often be unavailable during times of emotional anguish.

Lastly, ambivalent or resistant attachment children adopt an indecisive behavioral style towards their attachment figure. According to Ainsworth (1971, 1978), the child will commonly exhibit clingy and dependent behavior, but will reject their attachment figure when engaging in interaction. In this style of interaction, children fail to develop any feelings of security from their attachment caregiver. This results in difficulty moving away from their attachment figure to explore new environments. Due to the inconsistent level of response to their needs from their primary caregiver, these children are difficult to soothe or comfort when distressed.

As an explanation for the different attachment types, Ainsworth (1978) suggested the caregiver sensitivity hypothesis. It argues that a child's attachment style is dependent on the behavior their mother shows towards them. She argues that sensitive attached infants are associated with sensitive and responsive primary care. Insecure ambivalent attached children are associated with inconsistent primary care whose needs are sometimes met, and sometimes ignored. Insecure avoidant infants are associated with unresponsive primary care. The child comes to believe that communication of needs has no influence on their caregiver. Ainsworth's findings provided the first empirical evidence for Bowlby's theory of attachment.

A core tenet of teacher-student relationships when approaching them from an attachment perspective is the belief that students bring to the classroom relational schemas, or models, about the nature of social relationships and their social world (Bowlby, 1988). These models are believed to influence the quality of future relationships, particularly with teachers, by shaping students' interpretations of



interactions within a learning environment. By affecting children's self-views, views of others, and views of self-other relationships, these self-models can work to potentially confine the quality of future relationships.

Reflecting the attachment descriptions established by Ainsworth, educational researchers generated corresponding dimensions based on those delineations and research findings. These recurring dimensions in the literature were conflict, closeness, and dependency, found consistently across different early school ages, and based on teacher report measures such as the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1994). Conflict refers to the negativity or lack of rapport between teachers and students. When relationships are assessed from a teacher's perspective, this factor seems to be most strongly related to child outcomes (Ladd & Burges, 2001). Regarding conflict, researchers also found a positive correlation with children's feeling of school avoidance and a negative correlation with school liking and classroom cooperation. Furthermore, relationships that continuously had high levels of conflict were linked with children's increase in perceived aggressive behavior, as well as a decrease in their prosocial behavior (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Pianta (1994) also reports that conflicting relationships also correlated with children's decrease in competence over time as perceived by teachers.

On the other hand, closeness refers to the degree of warmth and positive affect between the teacher and student. This dimension also includes how comfortable a child is approaching a teacher. Researchers suggest that relationships characterized with high levels of closeness result in children showcasing higher levels of school adjustment in

comparison to classmates whose relationships scored lower on the closeness dimension (Pianta, 1994, 1999). Lastly, dependency refers to the extent to which children display clinginess or possessiveness with a teacher (Pianta, 1994). Unlike closeness, relationships with high dependence scores were linked to students with difficulties adjusting to school, demonstrating less classroom engagement, and more negative attitudes (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

**Motivation perspective.** According to Davis (2003), apart from attachment perspective, the teacher-student relationship has also been examined from a motivation perspective, and a sociocultural perspective. It is important to point out, however, that these ways of approaching the teacher-student relationship share a great deal of commonalities with attachment theory, and should therefore, not be thought of as exclusive of one another. The belief that TSRs play a key role in motivating students to learn is not new in motivation literature (Brophy & Kher, 1985; Brophy, 1998). However, unlike attachment perspectives that view TSRs as more defined by parent-child relationships, motivation perspectives view TSRs as more defined by the educational context. This progression has extended our understanding of how classroom contexts and students' social motivational beliefs can shape relationship quality and the motivation to learn.

Levels of closeness alone between teachers and students no longer characterize impactful relationships. Instead they're characterized by how much one can motivate the other to learn (Davis, 2006). Whereas before researchers believed that "if students liked you, they would go along with almost anything" (Jones, 1987, p. 170), that belief quickly

changed as the field expanded. Instead, findings indicate “students not only appreciate the structure and support that teacher relationships can provide, but also the ability of teachers to help them feel successful in educational pursuits” (Davis, 2003, p.212).

Central to approaching TSRs from a motivational perspective is Deci and Ryan’s (2000) self-determination theory, which assumes that students’ motivation to learn is based on three physiological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Relatedness refers to the need to feel belongingness and connectedness to others. Competence refers to the ability to perform adequately. And autonomy refers to the need to feel control or agency. Some argue that the sense for relatedness is the most important component of self-determination theory regarding TSRs (den Brok & van Tartwijk, 2015).

Allowing investigators to determine what dimensions to use as indicators of positive relationships, the domains of closeness, dependency and conflict from attachment theory seem to be paralleled by the domains of involvement, competence, and autonomy in motivation literature (Davis, 2003). Relationships characterized with high levels of these domains result in higher levels of student motivation, engagement, and performance (Davis, 2006). Seeing as how students’ behavioral and emotional engagement in class were influenced by the actual and perceived levels of involvement of the teacher (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), a deeper appreciation for the duality of teacher-student relationships seemed to be the new norm in the field. While assessing relationship quality from both teacher and student perspectives was not new in the field, taking into account students’ perceptions of the competence of teachers was. (Davis, 2003, 2006).

**Sociocultural perspective.** Although attachment and motivation perspectives can lend themselves to studies using a sociocultural approach, most of these studies move past exploring the effects of teachers on students and vice versa. Sociocultural perspectives exploring TSRs simply recognize that the dyad that is the teacher and student cannot be separated from their classroom and school contexts (Goldstein, 1999; Turner & Meyer, 2000). Within sociocultural studies of the teacher-student relationship, relationships are seen “as embedded within classrooms, classrooms as embedded within schools, and schools as embedded within an academic culture dictated by local and societal norms” (Davis, 2003, p.218). Sociocultural researchers attempt to look at influences and patterns within larger systems, instead of patterns between individuals. In studying the teacher-child relationship from a sociocultural approach then, researchers might investigate the role of class size on academic achievement, the relationship of ratio between adults and students in a classroom with level of student engagement, or the influences of schools’ standards on students’ self-efficacy. Sociocultural approaches are less likely to focus on organizational characteristics, but instead on the culture or climate of a class or school as contributors to the development of positive teacher-student relationships.

In combining motivational approaches with sociocultural approaches, one prevailing perspective in research is the social constructivist perspective on teacher-student relationships. Interestingly enough, this perspective promotes high levels of autonomy in the classroom, while establishing supportive relationships among all participants of a classroom (Devries & Zan, 1996). From this perspective, teachers seem

to negotiate meaning making with students through cognitive activities, as well as social cognitive activities (Mehan, 1984; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamachi, 2000). In this approach, teachers carefully negotiate the use of language, interactions with students and among students, class activities and instructional strategies, as well as power. “To be an effective guide in helping students to master intellectual and social knowledge, teachers need to find ways to connect with students’ own understandings of both the academic domain and adult-child relationships” (Davis, 2003, p.219). In pursuing an understanding through this approach, teachers might rely on both academic and nonacademic interactions, further elaborating our framework of teacher-student relationships. Research in motivation, as well as sociocultural perspectives are helping disclaim the notion that older students no longer need adult relationships, or that they need them less than younger students. They simply need adult relationships in different ways, taking into account context.

Oddly enough, research in this area has also expanded the knowledge about teachers’ preconceived stereotypes of adolescence. The long-held belief that teenage students tend to be rebellious, detached, and conflicting has become norm setting in education (Finders, 1997). In examining teachers’ roles more closely, researchers found that teachers also exhibit distancing behaviors from their students in response to their stereotypes (Finders, 1997). Believing that they are responding to adolescents’ needs by giving them space, some distancing behaviors may be more of a way of protecting themselves. Unfortunately, this type of behavior only perpetuates diminishing relationships with older students. For middle school and high school teachers that do

challenge the dominant beliefs of safeguarding themselves, not only do they build more meaningful relationships with students, they also encourage them to branch out within the school community (Goldstein, 1999).

### **School Climate**

In trying to expand teacher-student relationship studies beyond the classroom, the context then becomes the school itself and the effect of relationships on the overall climate of the learning environment. Researchers as well as educators have increasingly recognized the importance of school climate over the past 30 years, although it has been a topic of conversation since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the United States, as well as around the world, school climate is gaining traction as a school improvement approach that promotes a better learning environment for K-12 students (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). The Centers for Disease Control (2009) have gone as far as recommending school climate reform as a data-driven strategy that encourages healthy relationships, an increased sense of connectedness, and dropout prevention. According to the National School Climate Center (2007), school climate is defined as “norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe.” It is the product of positive relationships between students, teachers, school staff, educational leaders, and families, and it is fostered through a common vision of respect and commitment. Furthermore, the NSCC breaks down school climate into the following five dimensions: (a) safety, (b) relationships, (c) teaching and learning, (d) institutional environment, and (e) school improvement process. Linking teacher-student relationships

with the level of school climate could serve as a way to expand the field of TSRs beyond the classroom setting and into the general school environment.

Originating with researchers such as Perry (1908), Dewey (1916), and Durkheim (1961), there was recognition that school culture had a distinctive effect on the life and learning of its students. However, the rise of empirically studying school climate came out of organization research coupled with the observation that a good deal of student achievement was accounted for by school specific processes (Anderson, 1982). Yet, even though this educational topic is increasing in popularity, it is still something difficult to generate consensus around (Gerhenson & Langbeing, 2015). Particularly in the U.S., state policies usually are not aligned with school climate research. While school climate is recommended as an accountability indicator under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), it is up to community stakeholders to define it and incorporate it into their plans, making this optional.

Despite being somewhat of a vague term, school climate continues to be correlated to increases in student outcomes such as engagement, achievement, peer relations, and academic optimism (Bodovski, Nahum-Shani, & Walsh, 2013; Lee & Smith, 1999; Levpuscek & Zuponic, 2009; Kilinc, 2013). However, even as school climate is cited as a source of influence, the reason behind how to best establish a positive school climate remains. It is my belief that despite environmental factors, a positive school climate ultimately derives from the types of relationships promoted within a school, between all stakeholders. More specifically, I believe the promotion of

positive teacher-student relationships school wide would have a vast influence on school climate, indirectly affecting student outcomes in a positive manner.

### **School Culture**

While often used synonymously with school climate, school culture also plays a key role in the functioning of a school. As is the case for any social institution, schools have cultures of their own that emerge from their structures and processes of intentions, interactions, and behaviors (Hoy & Miskel, 1996; Barth, 2002, Brady, 2008). A school culture has a distinctive set of values, attitudes, and conducts, created by students, teachers, administrators, and other staff, which become characteristic of the school as a whole (Gaskell, 1995). Described as ethos, it is the specific climate that stems from an individual school as a social organization. According to Allan (2002), those working in international schools will recognize that culture is not only a framework for interpretation, but also a determinant factor in the process of inter-cultural interaction.

According to den Brok and van Tartwijk (2015), the influence of culture and national origin on TSRs is of particular interest in international classrooms. The unique context of each international school tends to create an environment where all stakeholders must exhibit sound intercultural communication skills (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Furthermore, the cultural exchanges between individuals within a school also take place in a unique national or regional culture. Adaptation towards the other requires acculturation, which can lead to learning environments with greater motivation (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004).

### **Sustainable Leadership**



While many facets of contributors to a positive and successful learning environment have been discussed, what brings it all together often goes unaccounted for. Unfortunately, the educational reforms and standards movement of the last two decades in the U.S. have proven to be unsustainable, resulting in high leadership turnover and burn out (Spring, 2016). At this time of increased accountability, it is common for teachers to serve under a revolving number of principals, often times removed and replaced by impatient school boards seeking results (Cook, 2014). The respective leadership in schools directly impacts teachers and their professional practice. Therefore, in order for there to be a strong positive school culture and the consistent implementation of rigorous instructional practices, sustainable leadership needs to exist.

Sustainable leadership, according to Glickman (2002), seeks to create lasting advances in learning, rather than focus on short-term gains in test scores. This is consistent with Hargreaves and Fink (2004), who view sustainable leadership as a shared responsibility that befalls all members of an educational community. This notion is expanded on by Cook (2014), who states, “sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it, and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development” (pp. 3). This statement is congruent with views of transformational leadership that support the importance of developing a collaborative school culture based on commonly held beliefs, values, and goals of the institution. Sustainable leadership is developed, communicated, and nurtured within this culture of shared understanding.

However, according to Hargreaves and Fink (2004; 2006), sustainable leadership is more than simply seeking to distribute leadership responsibilities. According to Fullan (2005), sustainable leadership builds a leadership culture based on moral purpose. In their early publications, as well as in their book *Sustainable Leadership*, Hargreaves and Fink (2004; 2006) developed The Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership based on surpassing matters of mere endurance. The principles include: 1) creating and preserving sustaining learning; 2) securing success over time; 3) sustaining the leadership of others; 4) addressing issues of social justice; 5) developing rather than depleting human and material resources; 6) developing environmental diversity and capacity; and 7) undertaking activist engagement with the environment.

The practice of helping others reach their full potential, whether they're teachers, students, or other staff, is at the heart of school leadership that is sustainable over time. In a learning environment, this would involve all stakeholders working individually and collectively towards a common vision, not only accomplishing goals along the way, but also ensuring those results are maintainable. Leaders who clearly convey and advance a unified vision, who foster a positive school culture, who encourage cooperation and autonomy, and who promote faculty decision-making are developing leadership sustainability within their learning environment. To ensure sustainability, leadership must be seen as more than a mere collection of common characteristics. Instead, leadership must be seen as a culture of integrated qualities (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Nevertheless, international institutions are not immune to high leadership turnover as in the U.S. While not required to abide by certain curriculum mandates due to their

private status, one of the greatest challenges that international school administrators face is managing the board of directors. Disagreements on how to best manage a school often times result in short tenures for school heads or directors. According to Benson (2011), the average headship tenure in international schools is approximately 3.7 years. With school board members often serving less than 5 years, school heads rarely survive three rotations of board presidents. Unfortunately, it is often incumbent upon the school director to help set long-term goals and objectives for the institution as few if any board members have experience in educational settings (Nagy & Nagy, 2018). For the purposes of this study, sustainable leadership focuses on the integration of promoting healthy relationships between stakeholders and maintaining a positive school climate, while still working under the pressure of a for profit mentality. It is believed that this focus on and promotion of relationships inadvertently has created a school culture, in at least one case, capable of maintaining success over time, ensuring improvement beyond an individual leader's tenure.

## **Conclusion**

While the framework of the literature has been discussed theoretically, research is needed to uncover the intersectionality between teacher-student relationships and sustainable leadership. The gaps in the existing literature have been utilized to structure my research directions, particularly in the area of how leaders value and effect the development of TSRs. While the theoretical approaches outlined in this chapter have extensive support in their related fields, this review has highlighted the scarcity of literature of TSRs and sustainable leadership in international education.

By incorporating a case study method, I hoped to further explore how the promotion of teacher-student relationships could be used as a sustainable strategy for school improvement. Specifically, I wanted to examine how school leaders mediate the interaction between school climate and relationships between educators and students. The conceptual framework detailed below in Figure 1 showcases the intersectionality of the theories from which this study was approached. This study not only has practical implications for linking teacher-student relationships to sustainable leadership practices, but for fine tuning school wide approaches geared towards enhancing student outcomes.

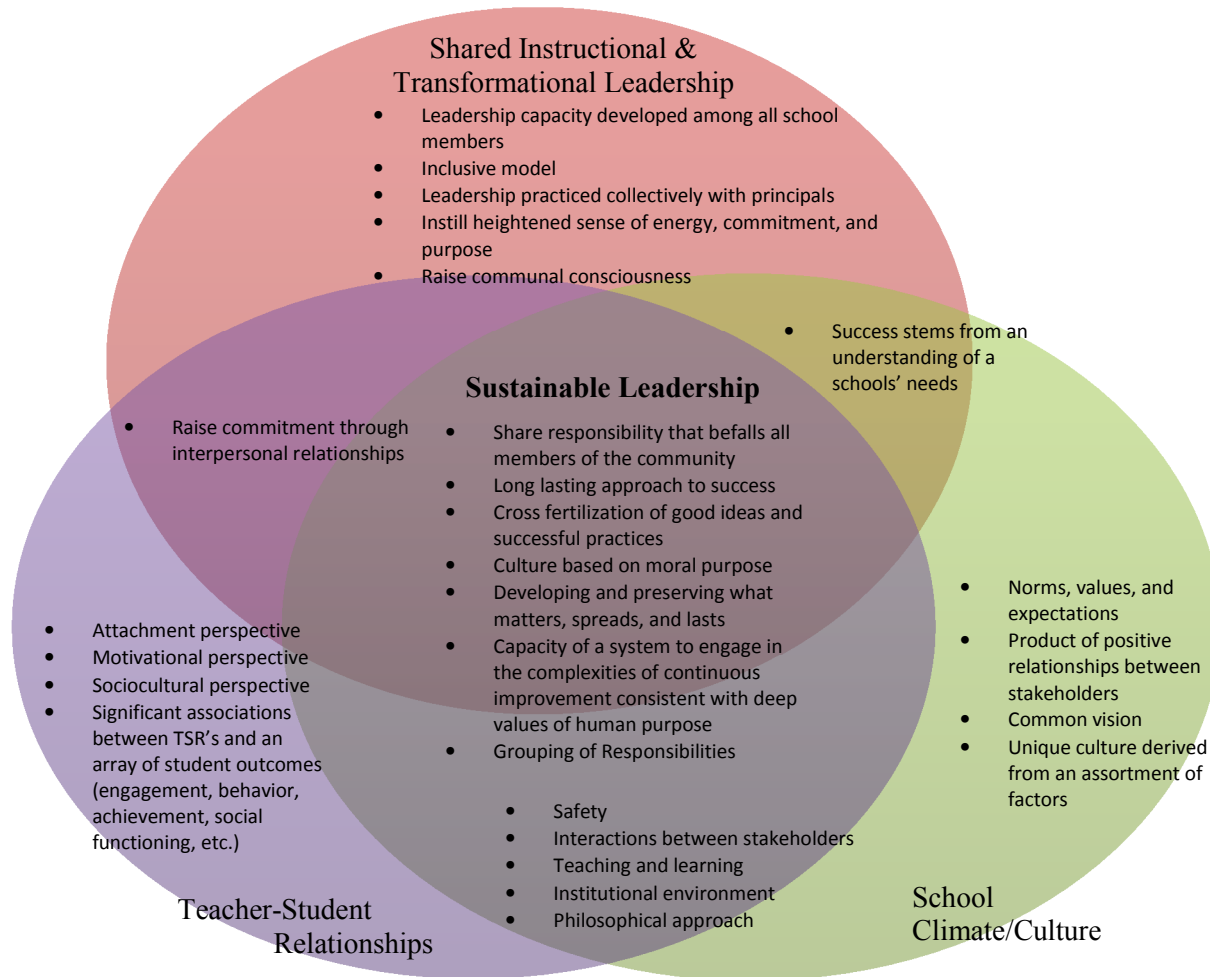


Figure 1. Graphic model of study

## CHAPTER THREE

The focus on educational accountability is not a local issue, but a global one. Recurring educational reforms often create unsustainable systems focused on reaching ever-higher benchmarks and standards at the expense of morale, leadership, and learning (Fullan, 2007). Knowing that there are identified essential components that affect sustainable leadership for school improvement (such as having a vision, building internal capacity, distributing leadership, and creating internal accountability), the primary purpose of this study was to investigate principals' perceptions of essential components of sustainable leadership coupled with how a school's long history of positive teacher-student relationships has influenced leadership for school improvement at an international school in South America. This research aimed to fill a knowledge gap by bringing these two areas of inquiry together to determine how school leaders often focus on relationships as a sustainable leadership practice. Specifically, the study explored the following research questions:

- What value do school leaders place on teacher-student relationships (TSRs) at Colegio Bolivar?
- How do leader practices influence the development of teacher-student relationships and the learning environment of Colegio Bolivar?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative investigation incorporated a case study design to understand the experiences of educational leaders within a specific site dealing directly with the individual case in its actual context. By getting as close to the subjects of interest as possible, partly by means of direct observation, partly by their access to subjective factors, I aimed to capture their thoughts, feelings, and experiences regarding the areas of interest. Yin (2009) defines case study as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 14). Stake (2008) states that as a form of research the case study “is defined by interest in an individual case, not by the methods of inquiry used”, and that “the object of study is a specific, unique, bounded system” (p. 443, 445). What these definitions capture is that case studies are intended to provide a thick description of detail and understanding that allows for the thorough analysis of the complex and particular nature of distinct phenomena. By conducting an in-depth analysis of an issue, the fundamental goal was to understand the issue from the perspective of participants (Merriam, 2009).

Shaped by my upbringing, my teaching experience, and my graduate studies, my epistemological perspective guided the way I approached this study. It also accounted for the proposed research design taking into consideration the complexity and diversity of experiences inherent in exploring leadership practices within an international school setting. While case studies can accommodate a range of philosophical positions, I view this research from a pragmatic constructivist position (Merriam, 2009). That being said, this approach sits along a quantitative-qualitative continuum, between Yin’s (2014)

realist postpositivist approach and Stake's (1995, 2006) relativist – constructivist/interpretivist approach.

From a constructivist perspective, the researcher assumes that reality is constructed intersubjectively through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially (Merriam, 2009). However, like Yin (2014), Merriam asserts that when information is plentiful and concepts abstract, it is important to utilize processes that help interpret, sort, and manage information and that adapt findings to convey clarity and applicability to the results (2009). By doing so, one also incorporates a pragmatic approach to constructivist inquiry.

That being said, parts of the two ends of the aforementioned methodological spectrum will also be incorporated. While I agree with Yin's (2014) desire for objectivity and his advocacy of using multiple methods with triangulation to circumvent errors, I also must acknowledge the researcher's interpretive role as essential in this process (Stake, 2006). Accepting that everyone is inherently biased in their worldviews and that there will be a need to avoid biasing the results, I also have to acknowledge that my past experience in this particular setting played a key role in understanding experiences and discovering meaning of the phenomenon in this context. According to Stake (2006), the role of the researcher in producing this knowledge is critical, and emphasizes that the researcher's interpretive role is essential in the process.

In the following sections, I will discuss selection of the site and participants, outline procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as speak to the issues of quality, validity, and limitations of the proposed study.



## **Site Selection**

Using purposive sampling, the site for this proposed study was Colegio Bolivar in Cali, Colombia. Like many international schools, Colegio Bolivar caters to a different demographic of the Colombian population. Initially set up as an American school for children of expatriates, it quickly garnered the attention of wealthy locals seeking to offer their children a US based education. Approximately 4% of its current student population is made up international students with the rest being comprised of locals. Currently in its 70<sup>th</sup> year, Colegio Bolivar serves over 1,300 students from prekindergarten to twelfth grade. Besides a group of highly qualified local teachers, most of whom are bilingual, Colegio Bolivar also continuously hires foreign teachers on two-year contracts with the option of staying longer (J. Nagy, personal communication, May 27, 2018).

The principal reason for the interest in this site was because I am a graduate of this institution and experienced firsthand the heightened sense of community and personal relationships central to the focus of this study. Focusing on the intersection of leadership practices and relationships, the units of analysis were the behaviors of the school's administrators.

## **Participants**

Through a combination of purposeful and snow ball sampling, 22 participants were identified and interviewed. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research as a way to provide significant insight and understanding about the phenomenon studied (Patton, 2002). While there was no set number of participants agreed upon for a case study, Patton (2002) suggests that a small sample, as opposed to a larger sample, allows

for more rich information to be gathered. The range of participants not only aimed to capture the experiences of current administrators, but of those that recently retired or transitioned to other schools, whom have first- hand knowledge of the phenomenon in question, as well as teachers' perceptions of administrator's efforts. In total, 8 members of the leadership team, 2 former principals, and 12 teachers were included in the study.

After my initial interviews with administrators (N= 10), I utilized snowball sampling in order to identify additional participants for the focus groups. This allowed for other information-rich participants to be identified (Patton, 2015). According to Yin (2016), selecting new participants based on the recommendations of existing ones can be acceptable if the snowballing is purposeful. Based on teacher availability, as well as principal's recommendations, I then approached teachers individually to ask for their participation in one of the focus groups. I went over the purpose of the study, explained what their participation would entail, and went over the informed consent thoroughly to ensure their understanding of what was being asked. All teachers I approached, except for one, agreed to participate. Because focus groups were organized by respective sections, all focus groups took place during their scheduled free time, which made it easy to organize. This also added a sense of comfort within the focus groups, as all were familiar with each other.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study took place from November 2018 to December 2018. This process was multifaceted, which included the following phases 1) planning; 2) interviews and observations; and 3) interview transcription and member checking. Prior

to beginning phase 1, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from George Mason University. After approval was secured, I proceeded to contact every administrator at Colegio Bolivar, followed by two former principals, one of which recently retired and the other who transitioned to a different school in Colombia. Together they served for over 25 years at Colegio Bolivar and have extensive knowledge of the inner workings and history of Colegio Bolivar. Once contact was established with each administrator, I sent out electronic copies of the informed consent (Appendix A) to be read over and signed by each participant. The trip down and the interviews were based on suggested dates and times discussed with each administrator. Once the trip was scheduled, I reminded each participant of my upcoming arrival. I also asked administrators to brainstorm possible teachers they would recommend for possible snowball sampling to take place in a focus group.

In the second phase of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) with each participant in their respective offices. According to researchers, semi-structured interviews are an effective way to gather rich, detailed accounts of participants' experiences (Kim, 2016; Yin, 2016). While the open-endedness of the interviews allowed me to capture multiple perspectives, it also served as a form of triangulation of perspectives regarding the phenomenon in question (Stake, 2006). Consisting of 6 to 10 flexible questions, the interviews consisted of an emic production of knowledge based on the participants' and the researcher's experiences at Colegio Bolivar (Maxwell, 2013). While use of the semi-structured interview allowed me to ask similar questions, it also allowed enough open-endedness to capture multiple perspectives (Stake,

2006). This was enhanced by probing participants to elaborate more on their specific experiences at school and/or with those in leadership positions. Each participant received a pseudonym to protect his or her privacy. Their administrative or teaching positions were also not mentioned to decrease the chances of identification.

Each interview was audio recorded using the Voice Record Pro application on the iPhone. Before beginning each recording, I obtained verbal consent from each participant before beginning the interview. I concurrently took field notes by hand throughout each interview. While the audio recordings allow for analysis through transcription, the field notes allowed me to record more subtle experiences, such as body language, or facial expressions, that arose in each interview. According to Stake (2006), this also serves as an initial record of emergent themes and findings. Once the interviews concluded, I thanked each participant for their time and followed up with a hand written thank you note in their mail boxes before my departure.

A focus group was also to be convened if administrators identified enough teacher leaders worth interviewing. Seeking a minimum of four teachers, I would approach each individually to try and set a time after school. While this focus group was initially to involve those that particularly subscribed to maintaining strong relationships with students, I quickly ran into issues, the first of which was organizing teachers with different schedules. Furthermore, I realized one focus group would not serve as an appropriate sample of the teacher population. Speaking once more to administrators, we opted to conduct a focus group with teachers from each section. Using their master schedules to approach teachers with similar openings in their schedules allowed for a

more representative sample of teachers, as well as the incorporation of different perspectives regarding the importance of TSRs. Therefore, separate focus groups were conducted with high school teachers, middle school teachers, and pre-primary and primary teachers. Each focus group included 4 participants identified through snowball and purposive sampling. Questions not only revolved around their perceptions of TSRs and school climate at Colegio Bolivar, but also on their perceptions of the leadership team in influencing those factors (Appendix C). While Yin (2016) states there may be a loss of depth with the focus group, it served as a valuable data collection that highlighted different perspectives, capable of confirming or disconfirming administrative interview results.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, I also conducted informal observations throughout my time at the school. These observations did not involve a formal observational instrument or a large sample of observations. Instead, these observations were part of a participant-observer role incorporated in between interviews. By being a participant-observer, I found myself in a fluid setting, which required me to make explicit decisions about my observational choices (Yin, 2016). Therefore, I aimed to conduct observations when administrators were likely to be most visible to students and teachers. This included time before the first bell for class, break and lunch periods, as well as the conclusion of the school day. It also included certain scheduled events like section assemblies, school wide assemblies, and recognition breakfasts for school workers. I also roamed the hallways of each section in company of an administrator to observe teachers' interactions with students. Due to the emphasis of

this study, my observations focused on the interactions between or among people, which included but were not limited to interactions between teachers and students, administrators and students, teachers and administrators, coaches and students, students and other staff, and collegial interactions. I recorded my observations in a notebook detailing time and location. The focus of the observations was to attempt to capture the nature of the interactions found in Colegio Bolivar. An attempt was also made to capture the level of warmth between those being observed, often times paying close attention to intonation, body language, and/or ways of communicating (e.g. colloquial terms of endearment, physical proximity, etc.) Because of my history with this school and my role as a participant-observer, I also took note of my interactions with the various stakeholders I encountered. Data were kept in a secure space at all times or on the researcher himself.

Lastly, I also incorporated a report of Colegio Bolivar's 5-year re-accreditation. Based on AdvancED's evaluating visit several weeks before my own, it was a topic fresh in administrators' minds. Seeing as the report praised Colegio Bolivar's sense of community and belonging, the final version of the report was shared with me in hopes of providing additional information for my study. The report was used principally as an additional lens from which to evaluate the school's success.

In the third and final phase of data collection, I transcribed each interview into a separate document in order to conduct data analysis. After each transcription was complete, I did a second read through of the primary record while simultaneously listening to the interview to further engage with the data. After each transcript was

reviewed and edited, I contacted each participant via email with his or her corresponding transcript attached in order to address any irregularity or confusion that might arise (Carspecken, 1996). By incorporating member checks, the goal was to reduce any misinterpretation and also have it serve as a way to improve the validity of the study (Stake, 2006). If a participant's response was altered due to a member check, a separate analytic memo would have been written regarding the alteration. Fortunately, that was never the case.

While I aimed to complete my interviews and observations within a small timeframe, my goal was to complete the data collection phase within 4 months. Data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection once the first transcription was complete. According to Patton (2015), this allows for the early identification of themes and findings. Because of the inherent bias that might arise, I also engaged in memo writing throughout the data collection process, particularly when on site. This allowed me to continually reflect on my interpretations of the data and serve as a reminder to check my biases (Yin, 2016).

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research studies involve a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For this reason, data collection and analysis were concurrent in order to begin identifying patterns, and to facilitate subsequent data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After the first interview was transcribed and for each interview thereafter, I conducted a preliminary holistic analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). While playing back the recordings of each

interview, I read through the transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the data, as well as to make corrections. According to Lieblich and colleagues (1998), holistic analysis takes into consideration the larger story and highlights rich themes and categories in the text. It is also recommended that researchers read their transcriptions multiple times and document initial impressions to identify the major themes they encounter (Lieblich, et al., 1998). By doing this with every transcription, I began to amass open codes or in vivo codes (Hahn, 2008; Saldaña, 2013). As I read through each transcript, I also utilized a manual coding process, allowing me to color code important sections from each participants' transcriptions (Saldaña, 2016). This resulted in the initial creation of 5 theoretical bins, derived from each research question and corresponding concepts from existing literature. After each transcription was color coded, I then read back through each transcript in search of opposing or negative perspectives and highlighted them as well. This information served as a 6<sup>th</sup> categorical bin and also as a critical lens for my interpretations. While these discrepancies do not need to be resolved, they do contribute to combating researcher bias, as well as providing context for certain leadership approaches (Stake, 2006).

A similar process took place with my observations. In order for meaningful concepts to arise, I reviewed my observational notes at the end of every day, allowing me to assign initial codes to the types of interactions observed. Compiling my initial codes at the end of the observational period allowed me to generate the broader codes incorporated in the transcript analysis. Making this a daily habit, along with reflexive journaling, served as a form of triangulation along with the findings from the interviews.



As I progressed in doing first level coding, the goal was to understand how the data might relate to broader conceptual issues. By compiling similar codes, the goal was to generate higher conceptual codes or category codes (Yin, 2016). The initial analysis included line-by-line coding, ensuring a thorough interpretation of each set of data. Initial examples of each colored theme were collected and managed in an Excel document. Different document sheets corresponded with each broad theme where examples from each interview were included.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative analysis is a creative process, not a mechanical one. It is a form of intellectual craftsmanship, with no single way to accomplish qualitative research since data analysis is a process of making meaning. Stake (1995) reminds us that qualitative research requires no particular moment for data analysis to begin. He explains that analysis simply means “taking something apart” (p. 71). In this case it not only meant the ways administrators influence positive teacher-student relationships, but also identifying and defining the patterns that emerged from that meaning-making process. It is an analysis that tells the story of an administrative team’s intentions to influence its learning environment and in doing so, setting up sustainable practices for success.

### **Quality and Validity**

Even though case studies are not intended to be generalizable, my goal was to augment the quality and validity of this study through methodological considerations (Glesne, 2011). As a result, findings may be transferable via a thorough methodology (Merriam, 2009). I am well aware that the internal validity of this study was threatened

by my researcher bias, as well as self-reporting bias from my participants. However, according to Merriam (2009) and Maxwell (2013), several strategies can be incorporated to strengthen validity. Of their proposed strategies to enhance validity and reliability, this study incorporated respondent validation or member checking, reflexivity, peer review, rich data descriptions, and triangulation. Although no study can obtain absolute validity, my goal was to strengthen validity by attending to several concerns or challenges.

With the inherent biases that this study presents, the practice of reflexivity played a fundamental role in establishing quality and validity. As a researcher, I attempted to write reflections after each interview if time allowed, and at the conclusion of days that included observations in order to develop self-reflexive moments. Reflexive memos allowed me to question my own biases, subjectivity, and perspectives regarding not only the phenomenon in question, but my history within the research site as well (Patton, 2015). Also, self-reflexivity allows researchers to view themselves as an instrument in their research design (Dennis et al., 2013). According to Call-Cummings (2017), understanding the negotiation of roles is essential when viewing oneself as an instrument.

The interpersonal communication between the researcher and the study participants was an example of interviewers using themselves as an instrument. As a presumed outsider with insider perspective and position, it was my assumption that participants may be reluctant to share their authentic ideas and thoughts. To negotiate this impasse, Call-Cummings (2017) suggests encouraging dialogue, providing suggestions, reframing ideas, and attempting to build rapport. This approach provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their interview experience and provide the

researcher with feedback. Having the researcher serve as an instrument in this study contributed to obtaining rich descriptions of participants' experiences, while also enhancing the sincerity of the study (Dennis et al., 2013).

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of this study came in the form of its methodology. While case studies can highlight phenomena in particular contexts, a prevailing limitation is that they lack generalizability (Yin, 2016). While there are similar accredited institutions in Colombia and around the world, I elected to explore a site which I believe uses positive teacher-student relationships as a sustainable leadership practice. Furthermore, while the topic of teacher-student relationships is a well-researched issue (Pianta, 1994; 1999; Wentzel, 1998; Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), it is mostly the administrators' perspectives regarding this topic that spoke on behalf of the entire school. While other stakeholders have valid experiences or information regarding TSRs, I have elected to limit the participants to those in administrative roles and those that they helped identify, that can speak to sustainable leadership practices. While focus groups provided valuable insight into the specifics of the phenomenon in question, they were still limited by the focus on their perceptions of administrators' practices.

A second limitation is the self-reporting that arises from interviewing participants. School leaders and teachers in leadership roles may have felt pressure to enhance their experiences at this site, especially if a superior recommended them. Participants may have not answered honestly in fear that their responses would reflect poorly on their school and that other participants may easily identify them. While pseudonyms were

employed in every phase of this study, anonymity may be hard to maintain in such a small study.

Lastly, my own position as a participant observer may prove to be a limitation to this study. While my coursework in my doctoral program has expanded my research identity, I have maintained an interest in the subject at hand throughout my graduate program. Additionally, not only is the topic of teacher-student relationships something I am passionate about, but I'm also enthusiastic about the site for the study. I am a product of Colegio Bolivar and my family name has gone hand-in-hand with the successes and failures experienced by this learning community for the last two decades. Nevertheless, my experiences as a student, a teacher, and a graduate student equipped me with a tacit knowledge capable of navigating the subjective nature of this study. Through conscious recognition and examination of my personal biases, the use of validity strengthening strategies throughout data collection and analysis stages, and the use of permanent products (interview recordings) I hope to have limited the effects of my own susceptibilities (Patton, 2015; Stake, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the methodology of my research study and presented an argument for addressing teacher-student relationships as an education leadership issue regarding their use as a sustainable leadership practice in an international setting. Data for the study included the results of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, transcriptions, field observations, reflexive memos, and artifacts. In chapter 4, I examine the findings derived from my analysis. In the final chapter, I make an argument about

what was learned regarding this leadership issue and how leaders can incorporate a teacher-student relationship mindset to contribute to the well-being of a learning environment.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what value school leaders place on teacher-student relationships and how their practices influence the development of relationships and the learning environment. Implemented in an international school in Cali, Colombia, this single case study design aimed to capture leaders' and teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding the phenomenon in question, and how leadership actions influenced said phenomenon. Evidence for this case study includes transcripts of semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teacher focus groups, informal observations of the learning environment, researcher's reflexive memos, and a review of a report conducted by an AdvancED team after a re-accreditation visit. It is this rich gathering of data that allowed me to explore multiple themes through a combination of different coding techniques. Maxwell's (2013) call in particular for multiple levels of categories was implemented, allowing for the development of organizational, substantive, and theoretical categories. By doing so, a deeper exploration of the underlying factors at the school was uncovered. This section begins with a description of the school and the study's participants. Following those descriptions are explanations of how the organizational categories implemented eventually led to the emergence of the theoretical themes uncovered through the data analysis process detailed in chapter 3.

### **Case Overview**

Like many international schools in the region, Colegio Bolivar caters to a different demographic of the Colombian population. Initially set up as an American school for children of expatriates, it quickly garnered the attention of wealthy locals seeking to offer their children a U.S. based education. Approximately 4% of its current student population is made up of international students with the rest being comprised of locals. Currently in its 70<sup>th</sup> year, Colegio Bolivar serves over 1,300 students from prekindergarten to twelfth grade. Besides a group of highly qualified local teachers, most of whom are bilingual, Colegio Bolivar also continuously hires foreign teachers on two-year contracts with the option of staying longer. Furthermore, Cali's unique geographical location, as well as the school's current site allows for a unique learning environment. Situated at the foothills of the Western Andes Range, Colegio Bolivar enjoys a temperate climate year-round, allowing it to institute 3 wall classrooms on a 35-acre campus, most of which is green space. Not only are the school grounds majestic, the openness of the classrooms allows for increased exposure and interactions with others, whether they be other teachers, administrators, or older students.

An administrative team of 4 section principals and a school superintendent lead students at Colegio Bolivar. Students here are fully bilingual from an early age and graduate with both a U.S. high school diploma and a Colombian Bachillerato. All five administrators participated in the study, along with five other school leaders, which included the curriculum director, the dean of students, the head of information services, and two former principals. While the study proposal called for a focus group of at least 4 teachers as an additional source of data, 12 teachers ended up participating in 3 different

focus groups. While scheduling complications made it difficult to coordinate between teachers from different sections, I felt the initial proposed group was not a large and diverse enough sample representative of the teaching body. For this reason, a high school, middle school, and primary and pre-primary focus group were conducted with 4 teachers participating in each group. In order to prevent any selection bias on my behalf, I relied on approaching teachers that were available during common planning times instead of those that had inclinations towards TSRs as originally proposed.

Table 1 provides a summary of the selected participants for this study.

Table 1

*Summary of Participants*

Participant	Position	Section	Years at Bolivar
Rick	AT	School wide	30+
Frank	AT	School wide	15
Pat	P	Primary	4
Ruby	P	Pre-primary	13
Mark	AT	MS & HS	28
Sam	P	High school	17
Fin	P	Middle school	2
Nick	S	School wide	23
Rachel	P	Pre-primary	14
Victor	T	High school	8



Milo	T	High school	2
Susan	T	High school	1
Martha	T	High school	21
Max	T	Middle school	3
Oscar	T	Middle school	1
Jacob	T	Middle school	4
Alice	T	Middle school	2
Janet	T	MS & HS	30+
Britney	T	Primary	1
Becca	T	Pre-primary	6
Nathan	T	Primary	8

S = Superintendent, P = Principal, AT = Administrative Team, T = Teacher

### **Findings**

As themes began to emerge through analysis, the study was always informed by the following research questions: (a) What value do school leaders place on TSRs at Colegio Bolivar?; and (b) How do leader practices influence the development of TSRs and the learning environment at Colegio Bolivar? While a variety of themes began to develop throughout this iterative process, those related to the research questions were more heavily focused on, keeping the emphasis on school leaders and their actions. Initially however, organizational categories were developed in order to consolidate data from the transcribed interviews and focus groups. Usually established prior to

interviews, they serve as broad subjects functioning primarily as bins for sorting data for further analysis (Maxwell, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). While each research question served as an organizational category, large themes derived from the existing literature comprised the remaining three; they included: (a) Leadership value on TSRs; (b) Leadership practices; (c) TSRs in general; (d) Culture, climate, and school support; and (e) Leadership and sustainability. After several rounds of analysis and the emergence of a large number of substantive categories, 3 main theoretical categories or themes emerged: (1) Genuine awareness and appreciation of the importance of relationships throughout stakeholder levels; (2) Success at CB revolves around its emphasis on developing and supporting people; and (3) Administrator visibility and approachability impact relationships and school climate. Each of these themes is described below with supporting evidence from the study's participants. Additional sub-themes or substantive categories will accompany each of the three major findings accordingly. Because of the overlapping nature of the categories, some of the findings may be used more than once as evidence in this chapter.

### **Theme 1: Genuine Awareness and Appreciation of the Importance of Relationships at Colegio Bolivar.**

All participants in the study, whether administrator or teacher, made reference to the importance and emphasis placed on relationships at Colegio Bolivar. While the initial focus of the study revolved around relationships with students, it was quickly apparent that while addressing student needs is one of the school's main objectives, they equally

prioritize the well-being of each of their members. Below are sub-themes regarding this broader category with ample evidence in support of it.

*Value placed on student relationships.* Every interview with administrators began with simple questions regarding their transition to Colegio Bolivar and what stood out regarding the environment once they arrived. Once a rhythm was established, all administrators were asked what came to mind when I mentioned the concept of teacher student relationships. Unfazed by the question, all of their responses seemed to showcase an awareness of the importance they hold at this research site. When asked about TSRs, Rachel stated;

I think for a kid to be able to learn, he's got to feel that he's got a relationship with the teacher and I think it's important for the teacher to establish that environment the first month of school, hopefully it wouldn't take that long, but she's got to work on a lot of inclusion things.

Rachel continued by stating, "They've got to work on a lot of getting to know each other and she has to share what she's like also so that the kids will feel comfortable and safe and not feel that they're gonna be excluded or not listened to." She also mentioned, "First days...you'll get to academics but right now we need to get to know each other." Clearly for Rachel, the notion of creating strong relationships with students early on was very important, to the point of not emphasizing schoolwork until after relationships had been established. Furthermore, she alludes to the notion that TSRs are two way streets and the importance of students also getting to know their teachers.

When asked the same question, Sam answered, “I think if there's not a student-teacher relationship, there's not as effective learning environment. One enhances the other.” He continued by saying, “ I think now, especially with the information that’s at our fingertips in so many ways, the inspiration is the most important because it’s gonna get them to go beyond their classroom to get more interested in it.” Fin answered in similar fashion by stating:

So middle school especially is all about relationships. Kids do not care what you know until they know how much you care. They can see straight through it if you’re faking it. You have to be genuine, you have to be authentic, and you have to care.

Like Sam, Fin also shares the sentiment of the importance of caring for students in order to successfully reach them. Both agree that positive interactions in classrooms lead to increased opportunities for better results, especially early on in the school year.

Similarly, Rick stated, “Obviously there’s nothing without good teacher-student relationships, otherwise it just doesn’t work.” As with other administrators, Rick acknowledges that any of the school’s efforts would be futile unless relationships were a priority to begin with.

Similar to the responses of her colleagues, Ruby stated, “I mean it is a must for me (TSRs)...The performance depends on the bond, on the link.” She continued by stating, “Teachers and students need to have a good respectful, clear, transparent, direct relationship in order for students to really establish learning goals in anything. I mean, once you establish a relationship, from there on everything works.” Sharing the same

sentiment as her colleagues, Ruby emphasizes the importance relationships hold for any learning to take place, and how vital they are to begin with.

Ken, a former principal and now superintendent of another American school in a neighboring city had this to say:

This is the key to success at school. One of the things I always look for in the recruiting process is the teacher that can make connections with students. If teachers can make the connection, they will be successful. If a teacher wants to focus on content and academic only, and not have real relationships with students, they will not have success at Bolivar.

Throughout interviews during this research, it was very apparent that many participants shared this sentiment, acknowledging that positive relationships are fundamental to succeed at Colegio Bolivar.

Finally, Nick had this to say about the value of TSRs:

When there's a positive student-teacher relationship students are more likely to engage in academic and social conversations with the teacher. They'll seek them out with more frequency and there are less barriers to that relationship. We hear it all the time and we see it. Our students during lunchtime, during break time will often grab a bite to eat and go right back in the classroom and sit and work or read and converse with the teacher or go seek out help during their recess time, during their lunch time.

The leadership team at Colegio Bolivar all value TSRs and their ability to generate a better learning environment. Administrators however, are not the only ones that

recognize the value admin place on relationships. When asked what value they thought admin places on TSRs, Victor had this to say, “Massive. We wanna know about kids, we’re very concerned about the kids. Student well being stretches beyond the academic.” He follows up by stating, “And it’s always a focus, isn’t it. It’s something Sam always says in the meetings, ‘Remember it’s that relationship you have with the kids, try and get them on your side, try this, try and find out about them, share something about you’.” It’s easy to realize teachers are very aware of the expectations placed on them to develop relationships, however, to do so in a manner they see fit.

Addressing the same question in the high school focus group, Milo stated:

Yeah, to answer your question specifically, they do place a very high value, and I think the important thing is you used the word information a while ago. We do get a lot of information about kids, from Mark, from the counselor, from Sam, from other teachers.

All participating administrators acknowledged the importance of relationships in general, but seemed to emphasize how they tend to stand out more so at Colegio Bolivar than at previous schools they’ve worked at. When asked about experiencing similar interactions at other schools, here’s what Fin had to say:

I’ve definitely seen transformation of kids. Kids grow up so much during the middle school years. But I think the element that’s different in my experience here is the depth of relationships and the depth of community. I’m part of this community in a deeper way than I’ve ever been a part of a school community in

the States. So yeah I've experienced it. But not to the degree and depth that I've experienced it here.

When asked the same question, Ken simply stated, "No, definitely not," referring that he has not experienced as powerful TSRs in other schools as he has at Colegio Bolivar.

When asked, Ruby stated:

No, it happens in this school. It happens in this school. And I think it has to do with the structure, and, of course, the learning environment and the community we have here. In other schools, I can say parents are more important. That parents are valued more than the teachers. Here, you value the employee a lot.

Here, you can make teachers feel happy working at your school. And I think that makes a big difference.

These statements speak to a larger picture regarding relationships that don't solely revolve around students. While all administrators made reference to the importance they place on relationships, it was also apparent that TSRs are not the only relationships they focus on. However, this is a topic to be addressed within the second major theme later on in this chapter.

*Administrator expectations regarding TSRs.* While there is ample evidence that suggests the administrative team places a high value on TSRs, it was more important to uncover evidence of them explicitly making it a priority. One of the things that quickly stood out in the data were the expectations they had regarding relationships. When asked about teachers worrying about academics early on, Rachel stated, "We keep trying to remind them not to push that, that they need to get to know them, they need to let the kids

play so they get to know each other.” Similarly, Mark stated, “I think we put a lot of emphasis that the teachers have to connect with kids.” Regarding Pat’s section, she stated:

There have been cases where I have actually sat down with the teacher and said ‘Let the kid see you, you have got a great sense of humor, use that in front of the kids,’ you know what I mean? Like it’s almost that they need permission to kind of open their hearts and be themselves and to establish relationships.

Sam also added, “So I have to tell the new teachers don’t be afraid to tell them what you do on the weekend.” It is clear that this emphasis on getting teachers to open up to kids transcends age groups and is a school wide approach, and something all administrators deliberately try to emphasize with their teachers.

Speaking in more general terms, one of the expectations that clearly stood out from Nick’s interview was the notion of properly communicating with students. When asked about the type of interactions experienced at Colegio Bolivar, he stated:

You’re always saying hi to one another, and we emphasize with little kids from the first year that they arrive at school is that you have to look people in the eye. You have to address them. You can’t walk by them without acknowledging one another regardless of what their position is.

He attributes this emphasis on two things:

One is the organizational culture, what we worked on and what we believe about how people should be treated, how kids should be treated, how kids should treat adults, how kids should treat all adults regardless of what the position is at school.



He continues by stating:

The other thing is how we stress how important it is that when you're communicating with kids, the quality of the communication. It's not just, "Hey, how you doing today? What'd you do today?" It's more in depth conversation of people asking more in depth questions with students. Not just, "That looks good. That's a good job."

Nick even discussed the importance of other staff members interacting with students. He stated, "It's important the way that bus drivers treat the students, the monitors or the helpers on the bus. We train them on what kind of interactions we expect them to have with students." While deliberate actions are taken on a daily basis to ensure proper interactions are taking place, what stood out is the fact that expectations are held for all stakeholders, including students.

Nevertheless, the continuous emphasis on improving the learning environment by having teachers focus on relationships was well captured by Mark. He states, "What we work on with teachers, which leads to this caring environment or notion, is that no matter how annoying a student can be with you, you have to understand it's not personal." He follows with, "How teachers react to student behavior, for us, is really important." Mark's words capture the underlying emphasis of embracing students for who they are, and embracing those interactions as a way to better understand students, and at the same time, enhance their ability to connect with them.

Teachers were also very explicit about what their administrators expect from them regarding interactions with students. In the primary focus group, Nathan states it plainly,

“Administrators...yeah they’re on top of it. They want you to do it, they want you to build these relationships with the kids.” In the same focus group, Britney elaborated on the issue:

Pat also encourages us to have community circles when necessary. And she has never been once like how far are you in the curriculum right now, because the focus is bigger than that and that’s a really nice switch from other schools I’ve worked at where it’s been like curriculum, curriculum, time lines, you know, long range plans, but here it’s like how ‘how many morning meetings did you have this week?’

This administrative focus on relationships was also elaborated on in other sections. In the middle school focus group Jacob stated, “Ken, and I bet you Ken talked to Fin, but both of them start with, every year start with relationships are the most important thing at this school. It just starts with that situation.” Alice went further and referenced how relationships are part of PD at the beginning of each school year. She stated:

They set the first days of PD when we come back in the summer. They really talk about that, emphasize it and I think Michael too, he talks to our students a lot about it like, “Hey how are your classes going? How are your teachers?” and asks the students and will even give us shout outs.

In the high school focus group, Victor mentioned, “It’s something that we’re always taught about here, it’s that the relationship that you have with the students, you have a good relationship with the students, they’re gonna learn better.” To that, Martha added, “Of course, leaders in our school make us think about it. And when you have those

meetings where they say, feedback, remember you have to have feedback, give feedback to the students. Not only about academics, also about behavior.” She followed by quoting her administrator, “Remember that it’s very important to talk with them.”

From early on in the investigation it was clear that relationships are not just a point of contention or speculation on how they may affect the learning environment. At Colegio Bolivar, there is an understanding that they contribute to a more positive school climate and there is a clear emphasis on ensuring their development at each level. As Frank would say, “I think the message is reinforced through enough channels for it to be very clear to people.”

***TSRs influence hiring practices and student placement.*** Another theme that emerged pertaining to TSRs and leadership awareness was the idea that TSRs play a key role for administrators when hiring new teachers and in their day-to-day decision-making. It is important for leaders at Colegio Bolivar to not only bring in teachers that share their same mindset regarding relationships, but that can also adapt to an environment where those relationships are experienced intensely from the first day of school. Furthermore, they also keep TSRs in mind when evaluating teachers, and for student placement.

During his interview, Ken was very emphatic about keeping TSRs in mind during leadership decisions, particularly when hiring new teachers. He stated:

This is the most important job of a leader, finding quality teachers that can connect to kids. A teacher who has all the credentials and all the degrees, but that cannot make connections to kids, is not an effective teacher. This is key to success at school. One of the things I look for in the recruiting process is the

teacher that can make connections with students. If teachers make the connection, they will be successful. If a teacher wants to focus on content and academics only, and not have real relationships with the students, they will not have success at Bolivar.

While it may not apply to every school setting, Ken's statement seemed to be very representative of the mindset Colegio Bolivar has regarding the effect of TSRs.

In his responses, Sam also seemed to take the same stance. He mentioned, "When we hire teachers, that's exactly what I need to hear. I need to hear how they work with students." He continues by stating, "I think we've been able to hire people with that profile, so if you go around you're gonna see that most of the teachers here, they're not just in the classroom talking to people. The kids gravitate towards them at other settings too." Further into the interview, Sam emphasizes this point by stating:

I've had some of my best teachers knowledge wise that can't make connections and they can't get very far with students, and I've had some teachers that may not have had all the knowledge but they were able to build relationships with students and they inspired them, and I think now, today especially with the information that's at our fingertips in so many other ways, the inspiration part is the most important because it's gonna get them to go beyond their classroom to get more interested in it.

He addresses his hiring practices later on in the interview when he states:

I think through my interview process I can get a good feel of personality and how they are as individuals. And with practice, I've gotten to get a good feel if they're

the type of teachers that consider relationships vital or if they consider the program and curriculum the most vital thing...but there's always something with relationships with students in the interview process.

The notion of keeping TSRs in mind when hiring new teachers isn't specific to only Ken and Sam. When asked about how much he keeps TSRs in mind during his day-to-day decision-making, here's what Frank had to say:

I think it starts with the hiring process. I think we send a very clear message that way. Whenever we are at our recruitment fair or on a one to one interview here with local teachers, we talk about what kind of school we are, we talk about how we see what the student-teacher relationship should be. So I think we send a very clear message that way and then, when new teachers do come in, all interactions with their principals, with me, with coaches, with their mentors, this message is reinforced.

The prevalent notion that TSRs are kept in mind when hiring new teachers showcases that administrators not only value the power of TSRs, but have explicitly kept them in mind as a resource for school improvement.

Fascinatingly enough, leaderships' emphasis of including TSRs as a hiring practice was also recognized in the focus groups. When asked about TSRs at Colegio Bolivar and the value they perceived administrators placed on TSRs, Nathan answered:

I think Bolivar hires teachers with that on their mind. The profile of teachers that Colegio Bolivar looks for is those who have the ability to stretch links with the

students with clear limits and I think that experience gives you that as well when you are a teacher.

Similarly to Nathan, Alice had this to say during her focus group:

I think that the people they hire really has a lot to do with it too. I think they're good at their jobs. Hiring teachers who care about their students. I was actually hired by Ken, but I remember in my interview he asked how I interacted with my students and what was important to me and did I go to sporting events and things at my old school and he just talked how important it is at school and he was very upfront about that.

Alice's and Nathan's remarks are clear examples of the explicit role TSRs play at this institution. In the same focus group, Max followed up by stating, "I would just add on what Alice said. I think we do a pretty good job of hiring and I think they look for people who are positive and flexible, I think, and are easy going, fun and just positive about teaching." To that, Jacob responded with, "I think there's also high expectations and again coming back to what Alice and Max said with the way they pick the teachers. I think they pick teachers who are ready to grow and want to be in control of their growth." While it is easy to see the importance administrators place on relationships and finding the right people for those relationships to flourish, it is profound to uncover that that importance is understood by other stakeholder groups and that they too take them into account.

Apart from keeping TSRs in mind when hiring new teachers, they also play an explicit role in other leadership decisions such as evaluations and students' placement. In

regards to teacher evaluations, Sam stated, “I’m always looking at that in my evaluation process too. Watching and see how they interact.” When asked about TSRs in his day-to-day decision making, Frank also addressed the subject by stating:

Oh it was in my mind all the time and it was a very important aspect in the teacher evaluation process. It was taken into consideration for example when placing kids in a particular group like, ok this teacher style is this, this kid needs that, are they a good match? So in decisions like that it was always, always considered.

When asked the same question, Rachel focused on TSRs influencing student placement by stating:

I’d say 99% of the time, oh my god yeah. Oh did we ever, we looked at that with many eyes and many, many criteria. We’d have a huge poster and we’d have little stick-it notes, we’d put kids’ names. We’d put a heart on it if we knew the kid had emotional problems and we had other symbols: highly academic, middle of the classroom, or very, very needy, student learning support system, and we would try to balance out all of that first. Then we’d have to say, okay, this teacher is not too tolerant with this personality child, they’d get frustrated if there were too many kids... We tried our best to always hook them up with the right person and in the 14 years I think we had maybe one or two parents who came to complain at the beginning. But we tried to avoid mismatching. That’s the success of 14 years: ... find the right teacher.

While all administrators have spoken to the value of TSRs, it was equally important, if not more so, to find evidence of them actually taking TSRs into account in

their day-to-day actions. Whether it was through their hiring process, their teacher evaluations, or matching students with the right teacher, the explicit focus given to this phenomenon allows it to permeate through every stakeholder level, increasing the awareness of it, and therefore, its effect.

***Time and resources provided for TSR development.*** Apart from uncovering that administrators place a high value on TSRs and that they hold high expectations for their development, it was also important to find evidence of things they explicitly provide in order for said development. Separately from autonomy and trust, which will be discussed later on in the chapter, administrators also provide resources, incorporate school wide events that build community, and more importantly, provide time for teachers and students to get to know each other.

In the pre-primary and primary sections, there is a larger emphasis on providing resources aimed at developing TSRs. As showcased before, when asked about TSRs, it is worth recapturing Rachel's stance on their importance early on. Rachel stated, "First days...you'll get to academics but right now we need to get to know each other." In wanting teachers to prioritize relationships early, one of the resources she described was the concept of community circles, a daily routine to start off the day aimed at building community and belonging, incorporated by every teacher. While at times certain themes or exercises are provided as the focus of the community circle, it often is a space for students to learn how to listen, acknowledge one another, and at times empathize with classmates. When talking about first adopting the community circles, Rachel stated, "We all got onboard with doing community circles. In pre-primary it is wonderful and I feel



like that sets the foundation for the more formal years.” Rachel, as well as her successor both referenced the key role community circles play in their section, making it a staple for years to come.

The primary section builds off of the theme of community circles by incorporating their morning meetings. In describing the goal of morning meetings, Pat states, “The idea behind starting morning meeting and making it more of an institution in the classroom, is to build like that trust and that inclusion.” In discussing morning meetings as a resource, Pat also states:

I think that’s why we’re doing the morning meeting, like I think we’re trying to help teachers like almost through muscle memory to create these relationships just as we’re asking the students to look each other in the eye, they are looking the students in the eye, they’re hearing about the story when they went to the farm this weekend, you know what I mean?

In covering the same subject, Frank, the previous primary principal had this to say:

When I was in primary, we did things in a very purposeful way like for example, we believe in this tribes philosophy, I don't know, if you are familiar, or if you remember, the tribes agreements: respect, no put downs, active listening and all that. We trained a teacher to become a trainer and every year she would train new teachers in this philosophy that basically talks about the importance of generating true communities of learners in each classroom and we would tell teachers you know, this first stage is called inclusion, everyone in the classroom needs to feel like he or she belongs and that time that you spend in doing all these activities

because it came of course with lots of suggestions for different types of interactions, all the time that you spend at the beginning of the year is well invested and it will pay off. So, with programs like that we were very clearly sending a message that this is important to the school and we're giving you the tools to do it, so it's not just the feeling, but there are specific actions that are taken towards that.

The specific tools that Frank is referencing are mostly found in the Morning Meeting Book, a resource given to every new primary teacher at the beginning of the year, filled with recommended exercises to begin building that sense of community in their classrooms. Providing such a tool for all primary teachers, as well as explicit training on how to use it speaks volumes to the importance placed on TSRs at Colegio Bolivar.

Those that seemed most impressed with such a tool were teachers themselves. Britney, a new primary teacher this year had a lot to say on the subject. She began by stating, "I was just thinking that this is the first school I've ever worked at where I was explicitly given a tool, The Morning Meeting Book." When asked to expand on the subject, she stated:

It's not a subject that we teach, it's not in the curriculum but it's in our curriculum in primary where I have the opportunity, the joy of having like a meeting with my class every day to build relationships with them and so Bolivar has encouraged me in giving me the opportunity to be human with my children, just to be human together.

Britney continues by acknowledging her administrator's support of morning meetings by stating:

Pat also encourages us to have community circles when necessary. And she has not been once like how far are you in the curriculum right now because the focus is bigger than that and that's a really nice switch from other schools I've worked at where it's been like curriculum, curriculum, time lines, you know, long range plans but here it's like how many morning meetings did you have this week. So I just think that when the administration puts the focus on those trainings with those types of tools it really helps, you know, gives teachers permission. That's why we became teachers, it's because we love children and it gives us permission to interface with them like human beings, and it's great.

In the same focus group, Nathan added:

Administrators...yeah, they're on top of it, they want you to do it, they want you to build these relationships with the kids, like Britney said, with the morning meetings it allows you, it gives you time, stress free time to bond, to get to know each other, to fix what's not working well, to start all over again.

While still on the subject, Britney continued addressing the issue by stating:

The first month of August elementary teachers planned not to teach any curriculum. That's how it works and I've never been at a school that was like that before because they are like 'focus on relationships' and I'm like cool, that sounds like a gift from the gods.

When probed on the effects of this approach, Britney also had this to say:

I'm way less stressed at the beginning of the year because I don't have to grade anything, you know what I mean? I don't have to worry about anchor charts and everything, it's just like let's get to know each other and so when you remove all of those factors that are stealing your time from getting to know the students then we really can just do that.

During the primary focus group, Britney also mentioned that she had been conducting a morning meeting every day and it wasn't until about a month before the focus group, at the end of October that her leader said they could move to having morning meetings about 3 times per week. Her response to that was, "But I know when I don't have morning meeting, and it doesn't happen very often, the kids miss it." While a lot on this subject was addressed by one teacher, her excitement was difficult to miss, particularly since this concept was still very new to her. Nevertheless, the notion that resources were provided for all teachers regarding TSRs was apparent.

However, even though teachers addressed community circles, morning meetings, and the Morning Meeting Book, the most important resource seemingly addressed by all teachers is that of time. While it's apparent that Colegio Bolivar is an academically rigorous school, the recognition that TSRs enhance the learning environment is also apparent, and for that to happen, time needs to be given for those relationships to take place. In the middle school focus group, Max addresses this issue by stating, "I would have to say there's time built in. I think this school does pretty well in building a time for advisory, or have the houses where teachers we can get to know kids." Jacob also addressed time from an academic standpoint. He stated:

If you're speeding through things, which is what I did last year, which made the year terrible for me and for them, your relationships get affected, but because we have the opportunity we know Fin if we say, "We've got to spend two more weeks on this, they're not getting it," there's going to be no push back, nothing even remotely close to that, and the kids respect that. It actually strengthens your relationship when you say, 'Hey we're not getting it right away. Let's take a bit more time.'

Regardless of the section you're in, the prevalence of time being an important resource kept coming up. In the high school focus group, it was no different. When the notion of time came up in the focus group, Susan addressed the difference between what she's seen at Colegio Bolivar and at previous schools she's worked at. She was speaking to the recent Sports Day that the high school just had and was almost incredulous at the concept of taking an entire day off from classes for students and teachers to engage in athletic competitions. While on this subject, she stated:

But it's on those days, and our tenth grade day we took, that you are able to have those more casual relationships with kids, and really bond with them. And I think the administration being relaxed about that kind of thing, and saying this is okay, we're gonna prioritize blocking out time for students and teachers to be together, I think it goes a long way. Because at other schools, no way. At other schools, if you had said, "We would like to cancel a day of classes to bond with our students." I know my old principal would've been like, "Absolutely not."

Being a new teacher herself, it was also easy to see how time as a resource has affected Susan in a positive manner. As I probed about the tenth grade day she mentioned, the following interaction took place:

*Victor:* We basically decided as a whole group that we wanted to get a convivencia (day to interact) with the tenth grade so that we could get to know them better. And so we just said, on this Friday, no classes, we're just gonna go to the pool, we're gonna make pizza. We brought my oven in, the kids all made pizza, we played in the pool. *Susan:* The games, the big scavenger hunt. *Victor:* Games, big scavenger hunt, rock paper scissors with the whole group. *Susan:* That was fun. *Victor:* And just had a day of... We couldn't go away for three days and have a convivencia, but we had that anyway, and I think that really strengthened the relationships that we have with the kids. And that kind of thing happens here, which is nice.

The fact that events like the previously mentioned take place at school confirms that there is a clear emphasis on the leadership teams' behalf of how relationships are an effective technique to enhance academic achievement by strengthening the connection to the learning environment. While they might have not allowed an overnight non-academic trip to take place, they were still flexible enough to recognize the importance of such bonding opportunities.

Other resources that stood out during the interview process were ones geared toward supporting students in an individual manner. The most recognized one was the

advisory program, which has a particular approach based on each school's focus. At Bolivar, Victor had this to say about the program:

Yeah but the thing with the advisory, the original idea of the advisory was to give the students another person that they could have a better relationship with, to promote them, to be advocates for them, and to give them ideas of what things to do. So I think it varies on the grade level that you're in. I think we're very focused in the tenth grade on that relationship side that we have with them, and also trying to help them through their transition into late adolescence.

While advisory programs can be implemented in schools for a variety of reasons, it was apparent that at Bolivar, it was implemented so that students could have an additional adult advocate and resource that they could relate to.

Frank spoke of a similar resource that took place in high school the year before, aimed at ensuring students' well being. He stated:

Last year they did a very interesting exercise in high school. They had the lists of all the kids by grade level and teachers who worked in that grade level were asked to mark kids with whom they had a relationship that would imply just talking about anything besides class related stuff. That was like the definition of having a good rapport with the kids. And so, very few kids, very few didn't get any mark and it was very important for the faculty to say "alright, we need to do something about these kids."

This scenario is a clear example of how the need to relate to students is prioritized and also explicitly focused on.

Lastly, in recognizing that bonding opportunities strengthen relationships and the sense of community, the school seems to hold multiple events throughout the year aimed at just that. In the middle school focus group, Oscar, another new teacher stated, “But the school community, the assemblies, the house competitions, a lot of little things that I think elementary and middle and high school all do, really foster this family oriented community.” Similarly in the primary focus group, Becca had this to say:

But there’s also a lot of different things done at school, not just teaching. It’s the thanksgiving assembly, it’s the primary assembly in the Bachué, all these things make school different. People come on Saturdays when we have Bolivar’s day, or on the days there is the farmers market. That gives us a sense of belonging and it engages us.

Having firsthand accounts of most of these events, it was overwhelming to see not only the level of interactions between teachers and students, but between all stakeholder groups as well. In my observations and journal entries, I recall how blown away I was at the school wide Thanksgiving assembly. An event where all grade levels are present, where parents line the walls of the outdoor space where it took place, with teachers that have retired are still present, and where seniors are the last ones to enter accompanied with kinder 4 students, the youngest at school, it was difficult to ignore the strength that this community exhibits. It is clear that administrators at Colegio Bolivar recognize the importance of interactions and their effect on the learning environment, and therefore, are explicit about providing ample opportunities for all stakeholders to establish a strong sense of community.



Colegio Bolivar has proven to be a place where relationships matter. Led by their superintendent Nick, all administrators have taken it upon themselves to reinforce the message that relationships are important, and that they have a strong effect on students' emotional and academic well-being. Administrators not only value TSRs, they are also explicit on their expectations regarding TSRs in their classrooms. Furthermore, they are clear on ways to enhance those relationships by providing resources, time, and bonding opportunities at all stakeholder levels. These leadership themes are illustrative of leadership that has a genuine awareness and appreciation of the importance of relationships and how it can impact school success (Barth, 2002; Brady, 2008; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).

**Theme 2: Success at Colegio Bolivar Revolves Around its Emphasis on Developing and Supporting People.**

The second major theme uncovered in this study is that success at Colegio Bolivar revolves around its emphasis on developing and supporting people, not just students. While the first theme addresses the first research question more directly, the second and third themes speak more to the second research question guiding this study. Although it is clear that the leadership team addresses student needs and emphasizes the importance of developing relationships with them, it is also apparent that part of the success in having others establish relationships with students is the fact that they themselves feel taken care of and empowered by leadership. The following sub-themes described below speak to the greater theme of support and development of students, as well as the faculty and staff.

*Adapting to and addressing students' needs.* Even though Colegio Bolivar is an established school steeped with traditions, one of the things that is highlighted in the research findings is their forward-thinking mentality. Naturally, this revolves around constantly looking for ways to be innovative and to always be advancing in terms of new approaches. Considering students' needs in their collective direction is part of their constant progression towards innovation. One of the clearest changes implemented for some time now has been a shift towards a more student-centered approach. By doing so, not only is the school trying to raise the level of academics, it is also trying to empower students in their learning. Sam was the first one to address this issue when he stated:

We're trying to change the culture of trying to be a number and trying to be something on the rubric of being proficient or being advanced and not being basic. We brought up the level of academics seriously here and for the last year and a half I've been really working with my staff on the student centered environment.

Sam emphasized the importance in the shift towards a more student-centered approach by stating, "And these things are super important because kids kind of have more ownership for what they're doing." Similarly, Fin also stated, "Our goal is to be very student centered and we've made a lot of intentional moves in that direction." He follows by describing what student centered classrooms look like in his section:

I think I would describe our learning environment as active. At least in the middle school you rarely walk through a quiet classroom. Because our kids are collaborating, teachers are asking them to take control of their learning, to engage

with one another. More and more risk and trying some innovative ideas without fear or judgment of failure and it leads to some cool opportunities.

He continues by stating:

We're focused on student centered learning. We made a big shift to standard based learning, standard based grading, because of the student-centered focus, it made sense. We're focused on deeper learning, building connections, going deeper with less stuff so that it's relevant and kids will be able to transfer skills throughout various aspects of school and life.

Nick shares the same sentiment when he stated, "We have a much more active classroom where teachers are not the center of the learning all the time, that the students have to be in charge of their own learning." These shifts in focus described by the administrative team are direct examples of how leaders are constantly putting student needs at the forefront of their practices, regardless of whether students are aware of it.

However, there is also evidence showcasing that the leadership team places a conscientious effort on ensuring students can advocate for themselves and are encouraged to speak out for what they want or need. It was refreshing to uncover these practices, which somewhat seemed like an implicit way of advocating for students. Mark, the dean of students addressed this issue when he stated, "We're constantly letting students know, if you have an issue, this is how you deal with it." He followed with, "We're here to help students, but the point is that students have to understand how to get help." These are very powerful yet simple examples of how Colegio Bolivar addresses student needs while

simultaneously empowering them with tools to further advocate for their needs later on.

This notion is also encapsulated in Nick's powerful words:

What you do see with our students is the fervor of which they talk about the school. We do see a lot of students that are okay students during their primary, middle and high school years and they're fine. They're good students but when they go to university, they excel because of... I think there's a lot of reasons. One is the level of critical thinking. One is the ability to communicate. The other is the freedom with which we encourage students to criticize authority or question authority with respect, which is what we consistently encourage students to do, which is a shortcoming of most societies, that people are afraid to question authority...and I think any good school knows this. Communication is key to a good part of your progress in education. You can read, write, think critically, analyze and then produce something innovative from all that learning but we have to give kids opportunities to come with it and it's not just through a typical classical program here.

Colegio Bolivar's ability to be so forward thinking with students' needs shine through Nick's example, and yet it is difficult to comprehend if students are very aware of such efforts directed at empowering them. Nevertheless, the leadership team is adamant about ensuring students have a voice and can exercise it. Another clear example of this mentality is when Nick stated the following:

One of the things that I think I emphasize over and over again is, when individuals or groups of people move in a certain direction and they all think that

direction and they think everything in that direction is the right way to go and a student or a group of students go in a different direction, the tendency is to try to corral them to go to the other direction, to go with the mass, to go with the flow, and I think that's wrong.

Nick's conscientious efforts in avoiding group think and ensuring leaders are flexible to change is also evident in his administrators. When discussing important aspects about Colegio Bolivar's learning environment, Sam explained, "I think the idea of you have to be open and progressive and wanna make adjustments to reach students you know, I think that openness is fundamental to any improvement here." Similarly, Ken discusses what specifically stood out for him regarding Bolivar's learning environment was:

The willingness to adapt and change to meet the needs of the students. The school is open to new practices and innovative ideas. There is less red tape at an institution like Bolivar given its organization structure and admin team.

It is evident that learning about their students and taking their needs into account is a prevalent practice at Colegio Bolivar. And it's one that seems to show no signs of faltering according to Nick:

Personally what I want to continue to try to do is obviously keep my finger on the pulse of the students, how students are interacting in school and what leadership roles they have, what then can do to play and how students can influence the school, not just through academics but through their interventions in terms of what rules can change, how the dress code can change, what elective offerings we

can possibly have, the use of space, how we can better use space for kids to allow them more freedom without trying to control them, but provide them with an environment where they're going to use it in a positive way.

Part of Colegio Bolivar's constant progression towards improving is taking students' needs into account. At times it may involve simply listening to students, but often it is through long term planning aimed at empowering students. In order to do so, this requires an adaptive approach, where administrators seek to avoid a group thinking mentality, and are constantly challenging their own assumptions and approaches. Furthermore, they seek to empower students with the ability to question authority themselves, taking on what seems an almost implicit approach to empowering students. Nevertheless, evidence presented in this section showcases how leadership self-awareness and self-criticism constantly aims at ensuring student success and empowerment beyond the realm of academics.

***Importance of autonomy.*** Autonomy, particularly at the teacher and leadership level, is another theme that was prevalent in the findings. As stated in previous chapters, autonomy is a fundamental component in establishing positive teacher-student relationships from a motivational perspective (Davis, 2003; 2006). Nevertheless, teacher autonomy was not originally addressed in the literature review. However, according to Marshik, Ashton, and Algina (2017), teachers might have difficulty supporting their students' psychological needs if their own psychological needs are not met. This study recognizes the importance autonomy plays at the school wide level, and its tendency to trickle down to every stakeholder level, including the student level.

Present in even the highest branches of the school leadership, Nick addresses the autonomy he is given in the following statement:

I've been given a lot of opportunities and this is where the Board allows me lots of leeway just to explore different things. We've been able to put in a couple of programs. We have an atelier, which is the creativity workshop at the pre-primary, the early childhood level which they just gave us carte blanche just to create a program where we created just really a maker space before maker spaces were in vogue. Now they allowed us to open up the project learning studio and they'll continue to allow us to run classes, even as small class sizes as 8 students if we want to and if we really feel like we need to.

Nick follows up by stating:

Since the board of directors is selected, they don't come with an agenda. It's highly dependent upon the school, the school administration to set the agenda for the school. In other words, where's the direction of the school? What are we going to do? Where do we want to go? Where do we want to be in five years? Where do we want to be in 10, 15, 20 years? In that sense, there's a tremendous amount of autonomy as compared to other schools I've worked at where you've got a board elected at a general assembly and people actually have agenda items that they want to put on. They want to manage the school. They want to micro-manage the school based on what they perceive as quality education.

Nick continues by describing how he takes advantage of the autonomy provided to him:

So my focus has been then where we can help develop kids in alternative areas of learning so we've got more kids that are going into arts... We really needed to continue to develop, which is needed for program development because I'm not into building a new building just per se. It's we have an idea and we have plans for a program and now this is the facility we need to promote that program.

Through Nick's descriptions, it is evident that the freedom he is given to envision new programs and run school as he sees fit, advertently benefits others alike, particularly students. There is a sense of liberty he is entrusted with, and one can't help but notice it is the same liberty he provides his administrators, and they their teachers.

While on the subject, Nick also recognizes that liberty reaching the student population. He states:

We're seeing our students given so much more leeway... I shouldn't even say leeway. It's freedom. It's not leeway. It's freedom to focus on things that are interesting to them, that area of interest to them. It doesn't have to be the other way around, "That we're going to teach you interest in math and we'll go [with] you, we'll develop your interest through science." No. You can have an interest that we can develop anywhere.

In addressing this shift in providing students with more freedom to develop their interests, it is also inherently understood that in order to do so, you need a teaching population with the same ability to mold their teaching.

While this quote by Max in the middle school focus group was used once before, it is worth highlighting again. He commended the school by saying:



I would say I think there's time built in. I think this school does pretty well in building a time for advisory or have the houses where [as] teachers we can get to know the kids. Also, the fact that I feel like there's so much autonomy for teachers to teach how they teach and build relationships how they build relationships, and I think we're not like a test machine. It gives you lots of time to do things for those relationships.

Max's words highlight a key factor at Bolivar, that while they hold high expectations, they empower you with the freedom and trust needed to carry goals the way you see fit.

In the same focus group, Jacob also had this to say on the matter:

I think the freedom they give us...is what makes me feel so good here. With that I can make stronger relationships. That is, for me, the autonomy that you were speaking about Max. That to me is one of the strongest factors in me creating an environment that I'm going to be able to build those relationships.

In his interview, Rick addressed a similar issue during his transition to school 30 years prior when he came on as a teacher. He stated:

I felt like the school wasn't restricting or wasn't already restrictive in any sense. I felt like I could kind of do, not exactly what I wanted to do but I felt I had some freedom, respect, which was very important.

To see similar responses 30 years apart speaks highly of Bolivar's prevailing notion of promoting autonomy at multiple stakeholder levels.

Aside from Nick and Rick, other administrators also address the issue of autonomy. During his interview, Frank stated:

Looking at it from the perspective of teachers, people need to feel that there is room for growth and there is room for doing your own things in the sense that there are certain freedoms and there is a level of autonomy that implies you trust them as professionals.

Frank continues by stating:

We always try to find the middle ground between 'yeah, there are certain things that need to be the same but there's always room for you to really bring your own perspective' and that is the art of teaching that people need to feel that they can really show here and they can you know, suggest things and generate ideas and I think that's really valuable.

Similarly, Fin also addressed this theme keeping teachers in mind. He stated:

So they're competent professional. So we said, "Look, instead of us telling you what you need to learn about, how about you tell us? We're gonna create a structure where you get to decide what you're interested and passionate about. Then we're gonna give you the time and space to research, to collaborate with other teachers who might have similar interests, and to develop yourself as a person and a professional." I think that's pretty innovative.

Both administrators showcase a heightened awareness and action towards empowering teachers, imparting a lot of trust on them.

Lastly, Sam also addresses autonomy recalling his own experience as a new principal. After his first year as a middle school principal, circumstances led the school to remove the high school principal, and asked Sam to take on both roles. Not satisfied

with any possible replacements, Sam came back the next school year to reprise both roles for another academic year. Recalling those years, he mentioned:

You had to have a lot of professional trust, whether you had it or not, you had to have it to give yourself some time, and I think that created a trust back in me because I gave them a lot of autonomy in what I did. I was always present, but I wasn't on top of anybody. I couldn't be.

Whether intentionally or not, Sam was able to recognize the benefits of giving teachers freedom to operate in spite of a difficult situation. He continues by stating:

And I think the leadership here is happy. Everybody...you have support. You have autonomy too, to make your decisions. And then the teacher leaders that we put in place, the same thing. Most of them are staying here for 10 years, especially the locals. They'll be here for a long time.

Recognizing the presence and need for autonomy, administrators at Bolivar highlight its importance as a factor that leads to increased performance at the staff and student levels. Providing others with the freedom and trust to carry out their daily functions seems to increase buy in into the school's mission, and a desire to go above and beyond what's required. Generally, this manifests itself in more positive interactions between the staff and students, inadvertently affecting teacher-student relationships in a positive way.

***Listening to others.*** Another important factor uncovered in the analysis that seemingly goes hand in hand with the importance of autonomy, is the notion that stakeholders feel listened to at Colegio Bolivar. According to Safir (2017), listening is at

the heart of school transformation. It is a skill that allows leaders to connect with others, to stay abreast of what's transpiring at school, to empathize with those who are served, and to instigate change through the power of interactions and not just regular forms of collected data (Safir, 2017). Leadership that listens understands that improving school is not an overnight endeavor. By listening to others, including opposing viewpoints, leaders construct a common vision through a dynamic process, as opposed to imparting a vision. This collective endeavor, therefore, requires listening to all stakeholders involved.

Listening came up in several interviews, including Frank's when he stated, "You really have to advocate for different groups, like really when you say you know, student voice, teacher voice, they really have to feel that you're listening to what they have to say." Similarly, Mark had this to say regarding students:

I think we've placed a big emphasis over the last 10 or 15 years with students that, "Hey, we listen to you. We listen to you. It doesn't mean we're always going to do what you want us to do, but we'll listen to you." We're not just going to tell them to take a hike. No matter what, we listen to them. We always follow up on what they tell us.

Mark was very adamant about this theme during his interview, regarding multiple stakeholder groups. His statements also included:

We listen to teachers. Teachers say, "Hey, what do you think if we tried this? Do you think if we did this it would work out better?" All of those are available to people here at school. People who want to contribute positively and make things better, nobody says, "Go take a hike." We listen to everybody.

Mark even addresses supporting others by listening when discussing how to address conflict between teachers and students. He stated:

We're not going to go and throw the teacher under the bus. We don't throw students under the bus, okay? We do it in a way where people feel they've been listened to, and maybe next time, "This is what I should about before I act."

Clearly, listening is a factor that has been focused on for some time now at Colegio Bolivar, and one that has proven effective as a way for people to feel validated.

Other administrators also brought up this theme regarding their practices. In his interview, Fin had this to say regarding working with faculty:

We may be doing something, making a minor adjustment, evolving in a certain way, and there's one faculty member that's struggling with it. Well the process in general will stop and we'll tend to that faculty member and genuinely listen and make sure that all the stakeholders feel heard and engaged in the process before moving forward.

In discussing her transition to her new leadership position, Ruby also addressed the importance of listening when she stated:

But, once you have the confidence, once you know that you're gonna be listened to, once you know that you're important for that person who is overseeing you, or supervising you, everything goes on smoother than if they have no clue who this person is.

In this instance, Ruby was speaking to the power of listening to her new staff and the important role it played in her smooth transition. She set aside time to individually meet

with all 41 members in her section to ensure she provided a space for them to be listened to early on in the school year. Fin's and Ruby's examples of setting time aside to address individuals' needs showcases the importance of being listened to at Colegio Bolivar, a factor that powerfully affects relationships.

During the focus groups, teachers also made reference to listening as an important factor in their practice. While leading a discussion on leadership practices that have an impact on the learning environment, Victor excitedly shifted topics by enthusiastically stating, "And they listen!" To this, Martha immediately responded with, "They listen, exactly. 'Okay, your idea is a good idea, it would help the students, it will help the community.' And I think that allows to the teachers to be happy here." After some further discussion, she quickly addressed the issue again by stating:

Sometimes it's just like you have an idea or something that you wanna do, if you propose that and they, 'Okay, go do it.' And you will be, 'Yes?' And, 'Yes, yes. We'll see if that works or not.' And it can be one year, or it can [be] for two years or whatever, but they support you in that. And that's something that makes you, okay, they are taking into account what I'm thinking about.

During the primary focus group, Becca also discussed how important she felt when recalling her interview with Ruby. Concerned about Ruby's transition as a new principal, she recalled addressing changes in her interview with Ruby:

What are you gonna change, and she says, 'Nothing that's working. Everything that's working stays the same with time, we can start changing what's really not working as we realize it,' and that really gave the team a lot of peace.

Becca continues to address the healthy transition by stating the following:

And there's people that have worked here for 30 years and with Mrs. Rachel and with others and they're happy. Why? Because it has been a very respectful transition where we have been able to keep what has worked and not add new things. 'What other things are you going to do?' 'Nothing, no more changes, we'll see how it goes with what we have,' and I think that has been successful.

These examples from teachers are clear indicators of the effect listening has on their demeanor. Whether it is to try new pedagogies and approaches, or to address concerns brought on by change, the ease with which they can approach leaders and be heard seems to be cherished and accessible to all.

In the middle school focus group, Max also emphasizes the importance of listening in large gatherings. He states:

I've noticed a big difference in the assemblies we've had. With Fin coming in and kind of refocusing how we behave and expectations in assemblies. I think it's been a big difference and I think he's really promoting relationships and when we're in assembly we're listening and I feel like in the past we haven't always done that very well and I think he's refocusing that expectation and the relationships that we have when we do have those assemblies. I think it's really been helpful.

While being the only one to address this topic from a large group perspective, it also highlights the perceived importance listening carries when attempting to establish positive interactions.

Lastly, teachers also recognize the importance of listening to students and the power it has in ensuring students' well-being. In the primary focus group, Nathan addresses the issue when recalling how different students all find a certain niche:

Even if you're a jock, you're going to find a teacher that promotes athletics and you are going to have deep conversations with that one. If you are not the popular kid who's into sports but more into literature, you are going to find that teacher as well that is going to guide you and he is going to share music with you, and down the road you are going to keep listening to those songs, and you are going to remember about that teacher. It's not only what happens inside the classroom or academically, it's the conversations that occur when you find a teacher that has the same kind of thinking as you do and like I said I think Bolivar hires teachers with that on their minds.

Speaking as a teacher and an alumnus of Bolivar, Nathan's words are a powerful example of the kind of relationships one can expect as a student. Victor also addresses the importance of listening when recalling specific interactions with students. He stated:

...she was a lovely kid. And then I just saw her dropping off a bit. And I sat with her one day and I said, 'What's wrong? Are you okay?' And she just burst into tears and started going on about how her parents were going through a divorce, how one was going to Medellin and one was going here. And all she really needed was she just needed somebody to listen and to be there for her. And it's that kind of empathy I guess that we have with the kids, because we know them so well, we know when there's something going on and there's a support system in place so



that we can say, 'Hey, we think there's a red flag here, there's something weird going with this kid.' And then it gets into the system, and then the school acts.

Victor not only touches on the importance of teachers taking the time and being comfortable with approaching students on a personal level, but also the importance of school's leadership to act after they've been informed of possible red flags. This speaks to a greater culture that's concerned about their stakeholders in a deep way, that listen openly to suggestions and needs, and that is able to strengthen the bonds between members by taking all they hear into consideration.

*People are valued and cared for.* Lastly, another important sub-theme of this section is the notion that people feel valued and cared for at Colegio Bolivar. While there are ample instances already shown to support this statement, it is nevertheless worth expanding upon, providing examples from various perspectives. To begin with, many participants addressed how welcomed they felt, or the efforts taken to make people feel welcomed upon arrival. One instance that Sam mentioned is something that now takes place every year with incoming teachers. He mentions:

At the beginning of the year, we take all secondary teachers up to the Chorrera del Indio (waterfall) and we have picadas (cookouts) and that's what Nick will offset. And then the principals or people who are gonna have any drinks or anything, that's covered out of our pockets, but the amount of energy there and after that and how thankful they are, and even the end of the year when I do surveys, what you like to see different? What would you like to continue? The amount of people that say Chorrera (waterfall excursion) has to continue, you know. So, I

think those moments of facilitating the bonding of teachers that are brought in to know them on a different side, and then know that that's important I think was a big aspect. I mean, you can think it's gonna happen naturally and hope it does, but it happens way easier if something's set up, facilitated.

Ruby also hinted to the notion of feeling welcomed, for new hires, as well as when she first arrived. She stated:

One of the things that the teachers, who come from a different culture receive is a guidance from the Human Resources Department. They receive help. They are not thrown into the city as, 'What am I gonna do?' and have no clue. They receive help, even in the small things, as their cellphone, the cellphone company. They receive help in finding their home, where they're gonna live, who they're gonna live with. They come in a week before. They have a welcome gathering, or get together at the school director's house. I mean, not everybody receives people at their house. So that little detail of the director receiving them in his own house makes a huge difference. It's not a country club. It's not the restaurant in the street. It's his house.

Ruby continues by stating:

Once you open your doors to new people, they feel more than welcome. I don't even think the word welcome is enough to describe what people feel. And I felt it even coming from a different local school. I mean it's not only for people who come from other cultures.

Further into the interview, Ruby also references how the sense of caring for others is a phenomenon that trickles from the top down. She states:

Here at Bolivar, people are important. And it comes from the head. And that's why I'm saying, probably Nick is gonna fall in here. But yeah, it comes from above. Once you see him sitting and having lunch with a teacher, with the maintenance people, with anybody, whoever's around, with administrators as well. So when you see that people are important for the head of the school, people are important from there down.

The sense of care and value also extends to the professional realm. One of the things Fin was adamant about was how much Bolivar focuses on developing people. Captured throughout his interview, he hit upon the topic when discussing the school's retention rate. He stated:

At Bolivar, our average foreign hire teacher stays here almost four years. So wow, what's going on that we've got double the retention rate? Well it's the community and the culture but it's also that we invest in people. We are very committed to developing our teachers to helping them achieve their professional goals.

He continues by saying:

So we've got these focuses as far as naming the initiative. But what really makes it all work is our focus on developing people. We've realized, and the research super strongly supports it, that job embedded ongoing professional development is far more impactful than sending somebody to a one off training or a conference

here and there. We've made a huge investment and had a focus in coaches developing teacher leaders.

He then addresses the subject of developing leaders from within by saying:

I've got several examples of teacher leader positions that we've created because of a person. Not because we saw a need for this particular position and we're gonna find somebody for it, but because we saw strength and skill in an individual and wanted to help them develop that and that they could benefit the community through that.

The idea of developing leaders from within demonstrates almost an altruistic mentality of paying it forward, whether that person decides to stay at school or not. It's an unselfish approach that ultimately garners buy in, increased productivity, and many times, a sense of loyalty. Nick also spoke to this issue during his interview when he stated:

The board allows me to create some opportunities for people, create part time jobs, part time leadership positions which keep people interested in school and keeps us...They'll extend their stay at school past the initial two-year contract. We've got many teachers that are in their third, fourth, fifth, sixth year with a contract in their career with us. That for me is where we start to develop the next group of leaders for school. Hopefully...many times we've developed more principals I think than anybody that have gone on to be directors at other schools in Latin America. We've got a tremendous cadre of principals that have gone on to different positions, particularly at the director level.

Not only does this approach speak to the level of autonomy referenced earlier, but more importantly, it speaks to the awareness school leaders have to ensure people are challenged and supported in their growth. Practices such as these only strengthen peoples' sense of worth, dedication to the institution, and the bonds between stakeholders. This awareness is summarized best by Ruby when she stated:

So, when we talk about school improvement, we're talking about being able to get a big grasp, not only of what parents need, or the community needs, or the school needs, but also what our students need. And, those needs of students and teachers are always taken into account. That's part of our improvement plan.

Teachers also made reference to feeling well cared for during their focus groups.

When asked about leadership factors that contribute to the school's learning environment, Victor stated:

As I said to you, Sam is the best boss I've ever worked for, and the reason is, he'll do stuff to help me. And if he said do that, 'Okay, I'll do it, no problem.' And it's that willingness to do stuff, because he treats you like a human.

Victor's response is a clear example of the power of relationships. Due to the perceived level of support he feels from his administrator, he showcases a sense of loyalty and desire to perform better when called upon.

Oscar, a new teacher this year, also expands upon the perceived level of care he's experienced so far. He stated:

From a supportive colleagues and leadership standpoint, I was very impressed and felt super welcomed. Just having a mentor, which I had never had before, and

having other colleagues that were really relatable like, 'Yeah let's go out and explore the city,' and 'We'll show you around.' That felt awesome and same with leadership. Leadership was the same way. It's a similarly familial relationship between administration and teachers that they expect between teacher and students. I've been to Fin's house three times just to socialize and hangout and drink. That is not something I've ever had with administrators in the past and so they're sort of practicing what they preach in a sense.

It is evident through Oscar's words that leaders want what's best for their people, including instances taking place outside of school.

Of all the examples of feeling valued and cared for, none however were more powerful than Britney's. Also in her first year with Bolivar, here's what she had to say:

Over the summer I had a really terrible family tragedy happen where I couldn't arrive to Bolivar on time and when I called Robin from the hospital, my administrator who still has never met me in person immediately empathetic, compassionate and was like whatever you need we support you, if you don't want to come to Colombia anymore we support you, if you want to come late we support you, whatever you need. Before lunch that day Nick sent me a message, my condolences, I'm sorry for what you are going through, so even though I haven't met these people I felt the support and the community... and when I finally arrived at the school a week late, I didn't know anybody it was really cool to have like little notes on my desk welcoming me to the community. My team had like a

little welcome party for me with like flowers and staff members slowly introduced themselves.

She continued by stating:

Arriving late I was looking for something different in my life and I lived in a hotel for over a month before I got a place to live. I had problem after problem after problem setting up my life and I felt like a special needs child in the sense that the school gave me the structure to survive, to endure those hardships like dealing with back home and my personal stress and like trying to setup my house, the school kept me stable. It was my lifeline here. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have made it for sure. The place where I felt happy and comfortable was at school, it was when I left that I felt stressed, so I think that's pretty important to say.

Britney's words truly encapsulate the importance given to staff at Colegio Bolivar. There is an underlying awareness that teachers' well-being needs to be addressed since it will transfer into the classroom. Therefore, this school relies on a myriad of resources to not only ensure an easy transition, but that you feel cared for every step of the way.

The sense of care was also very evident when participants made reference to examples with individual students. One of the most powerful examples addressed throughout the study was with Ruby when she discussed the case of a transgender student in primary whom the school has fervently supported. For a school that still has a very conservative population, within a country where transgender cases are not common or socially accepted, Ruby's words encapsulate Bolivar's stance on such issues. She stated

simply, “We value difference. We value difference in academics, we value differences in interests, in talent. We value differences in gender as well.” Without having to cite all the examples of how this individual student has been supported, these simple words speak volumes as to the lengths Colegio Bolivar would go to ensure every child’s needs are met.

Incredibly enough, participants’ interviews are littered with such examples. During the high school focus group, Victor generalizes school’s ability to individualize care by stating:

And we also have interventions that are individual with kids, don’t we? This is one of the things as well, we don’t just treat the group as a big homogenous group, even though they are very homogenous, from the society they do come from. We treat them individually, and when there are cases where there is needed to be an individual intervention, or let’s not give them the exams, they need to take this time to get better, or they need to take time...then we’re very receptive to those sort of things.

He follows up with:

And we in the tenth grade, we’re very...we wanna know about kids, we’re very concerned about the kids. Whenever the kids aren’t doing well, we ask what to do, we ask which teachers have got relationships with those kids, can you have a chat with those kids. Yeah, we really build that.



While Victor is describing instances of the grade he teaches, this example is true of the school's mentality in general. Furthermore, it is a clear example of the strength of relationships and how they are relied on to ensure students' well-being.

Specifically, Nick also recalled a powerful example with a young student who was displaying behavioral issues on a daily basis due to his brother being very ill. When asked by the teacher and principal to intervene, Nick mentioned the following:

It was just so obvious that he was angry. Every day when his little fits of rage would come up, he and I would go some place at school. We'd go behind a building where they had a whole bunch of old roofing tiles and we'd line them up and we'd throw rocks at them and break them just so he'd get rid of his anger.

We did that for about six months every other day and he got over it. Yeah.

It is worth mentioning that while retelling this story, Nick began to cry and we had to pause our interview. However, it showcases the level of effect relationships have at this school, and the lengths that administrators will go to in attempting to meet student needs.

Despite not having students as participants, there were also examples of teachers recalling feeling valued and cared for by their students. Rick in particular recalled an experience with a student after they had upset him about not wanting to have rigorous classes anymore since they were on the verge of graduating. Taking place in his AP English class, he described the following:

Anyway, this one girl wrote me like a page and a half email that night and she hadn't written more, I email them all the time and she'd never replied with more than a sentence or two, these kids nowadays it's 200 characters. Page and a half it

was just amazing and it was the most beautiful email I've ever read in my life. She came in the next day and she was really into Hemingway, she loved Hemingway, and saw I was still a little upset by the whole thing and she sat down and read a short story to me from Hemingway and it was like, this is the most amazing little thing I have ever received from a student, this is the most sincerest form of empathy that I've ever seen and there were several kids in class who kind of felt the same way. So, I don't know what the original question was but for me it's that level of engagement, it's that level of...it's still professional but it borders on children, it borders that line, that mentor/mentee relationship, it borders on that...if you show you care, they'll care.

Remembering that the question was a follow up to another regarding TSRs, he followed with, "They need it more at this age (TSRs). They need it and I think that's what drives it. Last year there were two or three kids that would have taken a bullet for me by the end of the year and I would have for them as well." Rick's account while moving, is a common instance encountered throughout Colegio Bolivar.

The concept of community and belonging are two common threads encountered extensively throughout participants' interviews. However, I feel reporting extensively on it may detract from the original focus of the study. Nevertheless, it is a factor worth following up on, and one that best summarizes this section of caring and valuing people. When asked to compare relationships at Bolivar with prior schools he's worked at, Nick had this to say:

I do think there is a very different feeling about the school. I can't say it extends to all of Cali because I know I've visited lots of different schools here in Cali and you don't see that. Plus, you don't see kids that just enjoy school. They enjoy coming to school. They don't dread it. They know that they're going to have a supportive environment. They know that it's going to be demanding but that they're going to be cared for. I can't say it's been like that in every school I've worked at.

Similarly, Mark had this to say when addressing school improvement:

If I was to give you an intangible about school improvement, people have to be happy. People, teacher, people who work here, everybody. They've got to come to work and feel good about coming to work. They've got to be happy about it.

If that condition exists, then you've got a lot of people who want to make things better all the time. 'How can I do this better? How can we do this better?'

People can be critical enough to say, 'Well that's not working. We've got to do something about it. Let's try something.' That only happens when people come to work and they're happy, and they know that people will listen to them. When that happens, then there's a harmony that exists that is conducive to improvement.

People get that satisfaction out of seeing things get better. It's not in their job description, it's just we want to be a good place. It's not perfect. I'm not going to tell you that everybody comes to school happy, but a lot of people do. I tell new teachers when they come here, 'If this isn't one of the best places you've ever worked at, there's something wrong, and you should talk to somebody about it.'

That's what I tell them. That sense of belonging, the only way it can come is if you've got a caring environment. That benefits us a lot.

Lastly, when addressing the concept of sustainability, Ruby mentioned the following:

I think sustainability, here, has to do with the value that people feel they have in school. That sense of commitment, sense of community, sense of belonging. I mean, teachers, especially the import teachers, they come here to stay supposedly two years. Many of them stay four years, five years, couple of them six years. And I think it has to do with that, with the way it receives them. With the way Colegio Bolivar, our culture receives them, our school culture receives them, and the way that they're valued as a person. So, I do think sustainability, here, has to do with that.

Nick's, Mark's, and Ruby's words summarize the notion of valuing and caring for stakeholders perfectly in these last examples. While they don't exemplify relationships or teacher-student relationships directly, they speak to the bigger picture of creating an environment conducive to relationships. Not only are administrators ensuring that students' needs are met, many times at the individual level, but they are ensuring that their faculty and staffs' needs are met in the process, seamlessly influencing relationships for the better.

### **Theme 3: Administration Visibility and Approachability Impact Relationships and School Climate.**

The third and final major theme uncovered in this study revolves around leaderships' visibility and approachability. Being a recurring theme in my observations,

as well as participant interviews, the frequency with which administrators are visible generates opportunities for positive exchanges to take place with all stakeholder groups and serves as a model for others to borrow from. According to Ellen (2012), gone are the days when principals could hide in their offices, administrating behind closed doors. Nowadays, effective school leaders interact daily with students, teachers, staff, and parents, and make themselves available within school and in the community (Ellen, 2012). At Colegio Bolivar, they seem to take this concept to heart.

*The importance of face-to-face interactions.* While sub-themes for this section were not as clear to organize as with the previous two themes, the importance placed on in person interactions is one that is explicitly and implicitly addressed in most interviews. One of the most straightforward examples comes from Frank when he stated:

I think that the face-to-face interactions are key. I know that whenever you have a large community you try to be effective with the management of time and you really need to work on your communication skills, but when you handle things mostly through email you lose that human element and I think it's irreplaceable. I really feel that whenever you send a message directly, when you sit down around a table and you talk about things then all these preconceived notions or biases or apprehensions or whatever, are dealt with, and you really say, 'ok wait, this is what I really mean.' So I think that is a very important aspect of what we do and try to have those conversations, and you see here the director and the principals talking to people just on the hallway, during break I ran into you and just talked.

When I mentioned how I noticed a high visibility factor, he quickly continued with:

Yeah, and that willingness to just ‘yeah let’s talk.’ And it’s also to help you keep your pulse on what is going on but it’s also yeah, you seem approachable and I think that flattens the hierarchies and all that.

Oddly enough, this crucial response came at the end of the interview when I allowed him to simply address any issue he thought we still hadn’t covered. His response illustrates the underlying notion of how the administrative team has adopted a clear approach aimed at opening channels of communication for the benefit of others and the institution.

When Rachel began speaking about visibility during her years at Bolivar, I asked her how important she thought it was in her section. Like other administrators, she shared the same view on the importance of this factor on her section’s success. She stated:

It takes two seconds to talk to kids but you can know how they’re feeling that day and I think it’s important to say hi to them and welcome them to school every day. For me, those were the daily of filling my cup, but also filling their cup, it’s a two way street.

Even at the early childhood level, Rachel addresses the duality of TSRs and their need for consistency.

Rachel’s successor, Ruby, also provided a great example of the importance of face-to-face interactions with her staff. When assuming the responsibilities of her new position, she took the time to meet with every one of her teachers to relay how important each one was to the team and to ensure the best transition. She stated:

Teachers, I had an individual meeting with every single teacher, 41 people in the section. I gave each one of them half an hour to get to know them as a person.

When you see them in the classrooms, you see the teacher. And you see the teacher sort of doing something for the principal to see. So, I really wanted to get to know them as a person, get to know their strengths, their feelings, their needs, their personal...anything they wanted to tell me in terms of personal situations.

After a momentary interruption, she continued by stating:

Part of our conversation had to do with their personal abilities and then dreams, or something they wished to happen, whether personal or professionally. And, of course, it has to do everything with how it translates completely into their professional, into their performance, because everything works from a bond you create. I mean the basis of everything is the bond you have with others. In Spanish we call it *vínculo*.

For Ruby, it is clear that the success of her section and the ease of her transition as a new principal revolve around the strength of the connections she can make. In order to do that, she understands the importance of providing ample time and opportunities for face-to-face interactions.

The importance of the openness towards interactions is also addressed by Ruby when she describes how it's a prevalent notion in other leadership departments of school. She mentions:

I think it all comes from the head. Not only the head director, but the administrative team, and part of the administrative team is the Community Affairs

Office as well, in which information to all stakeholders is always there. The openness of school doors that we always mention to teachers, to parents, to alumni, to the community in general.

While this example deals with another facet of the leadership team, it is worth mentioning as it captures the importance all leadership units give to remaining open and welcome to interactions.

Lastly, the importance of interactions is also captured by Becca in the primary focus group when she addresses the leadership's efforts in ensuring there are a great deal of opportunities for face-to-face interactions to take place. She states:

But there's also a lot of different things done at school, not just teaching. It's the Thanksgiving assembly, it's the primary assembly in the Bachué. All these things make school different. People come on Saturdays when we have Bolivar's day.

That gives us a sense of belonging and it engages us.

Thankfully, I was present for all the events she mentioned, and can speak firsthand as to the kind of interactions witnessed during such events. Of all three, the one that stood out the most was the Thanksgiving school wide assembly on my fourth day of observations on November 20<sup>th</sup>. An event where all K-12 students were present and was actually led by two senior students as masters of ceremony, the levels of interactions were too much to keep track of. For starters, parents lined the entire outdoor gym where it took place. Eager to interact with administrators, parents kept coming up to school leaders to shake their hands. As students filed in, I could see every school administrator interacting with students, teachers, parents, and other staff simultaneously. Of notice was Nathan walking



in with his set of 5<sup>th</sup> graders and going up to Nick to give him a big hug and a kiss before he leads his students to their respective seating area. A male 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher kissing the head of school at a school wide assembly speaks volumes as to the level of relationships fostered at Bolivar.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, a tradition that began almost ten years ago takes place. The senior class, alongside the youngest students in school leave the ceremony first just as they had entered, together. They move towards the pool to take several pictures. What immediately stands out is the ease with which the K-4 students are interacting with the seniors, and how the seniors took a very brotherly or sisterly approach with these youngsters. All seniors were in fact holding a K-4 students' hand while they walked to the pool, and a good number of seniors were actually carrying K-4 students either on their backs or on their shoulders. Of the almost 100 early childhood students, not one cried or seemed uncomfortable the entire time I witnessed this interaction. These types of situations are a constant at Colegio Bolivar and provide the impetus for all stakeholders to interact, share, get to know one another, and uphold the sense of community, which all so prevalently talk about.

***Ensuring visibility early on.*** When addressing the idea of often being visible to others, administrators referenced the importance of ensuring their visibility early on, especially with new students coming in to school or to their respective section. Nick, Rachel, and Frank in particular motioned to the importance of letting students know who you are in their early days at school, by being consistent in their approaches and exposure to students, allowing them to begin to trust and establish rapport with you.

When discussing relationships with students, Rachel had this to say about routinely welcoming new kinder-4 students:

I scheduled things to have them come into my office as groups, so I would invite them to read a story at the beginning of the school year, each class. I would get to know the kids, I'd spend 40 minutes with them, talking about the story, it would be about starting school. Then I'd give them something to eat, and then I'd ask them questions about their favorite pets or brothers and sisters or whatever. I would also do that at Christmas and at the end of the school year, to let them know how much they've grown and are they ready for the next school year and all that stuff.

Establishing positive routines early on was an important approach for Rachel, particularly in such a large environment as Colegio Bolivar. She felt that by having kids know who she was early on that they would feel safer in exploring a new environment.

The idea of establishing a positive rapport early on and allowing students to know who you are within the first week of being at school was also shared by Nick. When discussing relationships and addressing the topic of visibility, he had this to say:

One of the things that I do every year is I try to make sure that I know as many kids as possible. At the beginning of the year I invite the kinder-4 students, all the kinder-4 students by classes to my office. It's important that they get to know me and who I am and what I do at school and why I'm there and I think that's one of the most important things when you start a student off on the right foot and that they trust you and they know that they can trust you.

He continues with:

So these kids come into my office and I don't let the teachers come in with them and we talk about all kinds of things just to break the ice. We play a little game and then we converse for a little bit and I tell them what my expectations are and they tell me their names and their parents and their brothers and sisters and their dogs and their cats, and I start a relationship with them and it's important that I get to know them and I get to know their names, as many as possible.

Nick goes on to explain that the idea behind getting to know them early on and that students know of him early on is so that they feel safe and welcomed, knowing that then transfers into the classroom. He also speaks about how it fosters community from the get go with students and new parents as well. When discussing the consistency of being visible to young students early on, he also had this to say:

Also, I make sure that I go through the students' files so I see who their parents are and I see what their parents do, what they're engaged in. So when I have a conversation with their parents, I know something about these parents and I can make some sort of connection with them. By doing that, it makes them more committed to school and it makes me more committed to the student and the families.

Nick's example is a clear indicator of the lengths administrators go to in order to establish positive bonds with all stakeholders. As a result, they achieve an increased sense of community and commitment to it.

When discussing his time as the elementary principal, Frank also addresses the idea of getting to know students early on. He states:

I remember when I was principal, for me those second graders coming into my section were very important. I had pictures of them on charts to start learning their names very quickly and I would make connections to their older siblings and all that...something as simple as that, that you know my name makes a huge, huge difference.

Even though those second graders coming into elementary had been at school for three years already, Frank's statement communicates the importance placed on continuing to emphasize interactions in all sections of school.

***Consistency of visibility.*** Apart from ensuring visibility early on, administrators also addressed the need to consistently be visible. Not only was this captured during their interviews, but in every single day of observations as well. Rachel, being adamant about being visible to the youngest students stated, "I think I was very visible all the time to say hi to kids and the kids would come into my office whenever they wanted to show me something or talk to me if my door was always open." Nick also mentions being consistent with being visible when he stated:

Again, I try to be outside when they come in. I try to be outside when they go home. I try to visit their classrooms at least once a week, walk in the classroom saying 'Hi,' sit down on the floor with them, talk to them, play with them for a little bit.

During my fifth day of observations I was able to witness just that. At 7:45 in the morning, he asked if I had anything scheduled. When I said I didn't, his response was, "Cool, come check this out." We proceeded to walk and interact with all five sections of kinder-4, spending about 5 minutes in every classroom. Like clockwork, students would run up to him when they saw him arrive and greeted him with hugs and good mornings. In kinder-4C, students immediately pulled him into a makeshift glow in the dark room they had built. As I'm taking notes, Nick is lying down on the ground with students where I hear laughter erupting from the makeshift room. Once his rounds of the kinder-4 section are complete, he moves on to the kinder-5 to do the same. As in the kinder-4 section, the kinder-5 students interact with Nick in the same way. When we get to the end of the hall to visit the last kinder-5 section, I see that Ruby is also doing the same rounds and a group of 6 students also run to her to hug her good morning.

While addressing the notion of visibility in his interview, Nick also had this to say regarding administrators' consistency:

During those break times, we make it, as an administrative group, make a point to be outside and be visible and converse with students, not hide away in our office.

The same thing when students are arriving, it's important that the administration's outside greeting them. It's important for us to be outside when they're leaving.

Once again, Nick makes reference to the importance of consistently being visible to others, particularly students. Of interest however is that with this example he emphasizes the communal approach and commitment of administrators to be visible, knowing that it has a positive effect on teachers and students.

Like Nick, Ken also addressed the consistency of being visible and how most of the time it was a communal effort in doing so. He states:

The high school principal, Director, and I would spend almost every lunch and recess out with the students. This was the time for us to connect with the kids, talk with them about a variety of topics and to be present in school. This time with the students was critical to the success of the school.

Through Ken's example we get an idea of the relevance of how important it is for leaders at school to interact with others, and the implied weight it carries.

Sam too references consistency in visibility during his interview. Like Ken and Nick, he mentions:

I love going out on recess, break, and I'll just be in the cafeteria and maybe nobody'll come up and talk to me, but all the kids know if they have something on their mind where they can find me... I don't meddle. I don't try too hard, but I'm always accessible. And they'll voice their opinions or ask me for a favor or do that and I think it's just, it's kind of good.

Sam addresses an important point that comes from being visible, which is that others tend to gravitate towards you to discuss a myriad of things. In turn, not only does this generate trust and comfort in interacting with another, but it also allows administrators to get a feel for what is going on with people and with their section.

Continuing to stay on the subject, Sam provides another example of the effects of being visible on a daily basis. He stated:

I was just kind of floating over to the science room and they were all hanging out and the substitute teacher didn't come because the teacher that's in charge is getting a workers comp, and I just gravitated in there and class hadn't started, but a couple of kids started asking me questions about my history here. 'Weren't you a teacher?' And then I looked up and the whole class was just kind of fascinated about me, you know? And I kind of like, cause I don't get that opportunity to talk to them in a casual sense all the time, but it was just...they care about you, about you being there.

Sam's example showcases how quickly being visible leads to positive interactions with students. His consistency led to a comfort that allows students to perceive him as approachable. Incredibly enough, this example also speaks to another phenomenon of how students end up expecting to see you and are also glad to do so.

Teachers in their focus groups also addressed the notion of leaders consistently being visible. While on the topic of relationships and teachers' perceptions of leadership practices that affect the learning environment, Victor had this to say:

If I'm walking up and down the corridors, and I see Nick, or Sam, I can just sit down and have a chat with them about whatever. And yeah, we talk about professional stuff as well. But the thing is that you can have that chat. It's like there's a different type of relationship, you can have a relationship with them.

And it's beyond that, and that builds faith.

Similarly, Oscar also addresses administrator visibility in the middle school focus group when he said:

What you said about Fin being present and talking to students and knowing what's going on. I think that's a huge factor and Nick does the same thing. I haven't seen him do this, but I heard that he greets the pre-K students as they come to school every day and he prides himself on knowing everybody's name at the school. That right there, that fosters that sense of community, the fact that I see Nick pretty much every day, he's not an admin that stays in his office and closes the door. Same with Fin, same with the high school and elementary principals too and he's super positive. Between being present and being super positive all the time you get that environment.

Both teachers provide excellent examples of the positive effect administrators have when they are seen often around school. Oscar also makes reference to another important outcome of having visible leaders by saying, "It's a similarly familial relationship between administration and teachers that they expect between teachers and students." Administrators' visibility leads to an increase in approachability, which in turn enhances relationships in a positive manner.

*Students expect and are glad to see administrators.* As odd as it may sound, participants also made reference to how students in fact expect to bond with administrators in school, just as they expect to bond with their teachers. Having just returned from Binationals, the annual and most important sports competition between U.S. accredited schools in Colombia, Sam addressed this theme by stating:

Even going back one step to binationals. It happens every year, but man when I show up at binationals, it's like kids get up, stop, shake my hand, happy to see



me. 'You're here? I didn't know you're here.' I don't know. It's just like certain things where it's like...I don't think as a kid I gave a crap if my principal was anywhere, you know what I mean? And it's like, Nick says the same thing. I mean, when we go there it's like, Wow! They feel that connection. They feel like we care about them too. Cause we don't always get those intimate opportunities in the classroom anymore to show them how much we care.

While also referencing administrators' visibility, Sam touches on an important point, the duality of relationships. At Colegio Bolivar, it is evident that students as a stakeholder group continue to embrace and seek out relationships with adults, which many times include school leaders.

Fin also addressed this theme during his interview. He states, "So here, these kids wanna talk to you personally. They really genuinely do. They want to shake your hand, high five, give you a hug, that stuff matters." Similarly, Rachel also touches on the perception of students wanting to interact with adults and how she realized early on the importance of it. She stated:

I would see how the teachers would give the kids hugs when they arrived and say goodbye with kisses and I'd come from the don't touch, don't hug back, all that stuff. So the first year I was like, 'oh this is terrible, this is terrible, it's not good.' Little by little my heart melted and I realized Latino kids want to hug you and you hug them back and you say hi to them.

Ruby also references student affection by stating:

Yeah. The hugs we receive every single morning, the kids who leave me little notes. They love this sandbox. So, every day they come. They go by the window. They have to put their hand in. But that hand in there to play with the sand is accompanied by a blow kiss. ‘Mrs. Ruby, good morning. Mrs. Ruby, when can I come here?’ So I think there’s every single day something that makes you feel that you belong to the section, that you’re part of them, that you’re important for them.

The previous examples are a clear indicator of the importance students also place on relationships, and how they seek them out. Furthermore, it showcases the positive effect it also has on the faculty themselves.

Lastly, Janet also addresses how students seek out administrators’ attention, and how infectious it can be on the teaching staff. When discussing leadership factors that affect the learning environment, she mentioned:

But you know what, I mean Nick, we’ve known each other for so long, Nick you see him, kids run to his arms, they hug him, the tiny ones and he knows the name of every single one and it amazes me, you know, it amazes me. I mean, if this is what our boss does every morning with the best smile in his face and the kids run to him and ‘Mr. Nick!’ I mean, that shows exactly how our relationships, administrators and teachers with the kids are. It’s real.

Throughout my observations, there are countless examples of what Janet described with all administrators. While strong physical affection may have been more apparent with younger students, older students never hesitated to greet their administrators while I was

in their presence. Whether it was a quick “good morning” or a “hey Mr. how’s it going,” students in every section showcased the same desire to interact with their administrators.

Whether it’s to keep their finger on the pulse of stakeholder groups, to have others approach them without fear, or to show up to support to others, the high rate of administrator visibility at Colegio Bolivar is noticed. Educational leaders play a fundamental role in affecting this school’s climate, culture, and learning environment. Their visibility and approachability has led to effective learning taking place, where students and teachers are encouraged and supported, and where a deep sense of community arises.

### **Other Findings**

*Negative perspectives.* Despite not fitting into one of the general themes that emerged from the analysis, negative perspectives and sustainability were other important findings that were highlighted throughout the analysis process. While the category of negative perspectives served as its own bin when grouping data, there weren’t enough examples for any significant themes to emerge. Nevertheless, keeping in mind the context of the investigation, there were some participants who voiced concern over the strong emphasis on TSRs, as well as leadership practices.

Of note was when I asked participants in the high school focus group about the value they thought school leaders placed on TSRs in their daily practices. From the discussion that ensued, Susan had this to say:

I think possibly I might say something slightly controversial. So I think that relationships here are prioritized, I think that they’re the number one priority. I

think, and it might just be due to my experience of being at a highly rigorous and academic school before I came here, I think at times relationships are so prioritized, and the happiness of students is so prioritized, that productivity dwindles a little.

She continued by stating, “Sometimes I feel conflicted because I feel we could be getting more done, I could be doing more teaching, they could be learning more concepts.”

While Susan was the only participant to address this point, it speaks to a leadership need of being more explicit about the reasons behind focusing on TSRs and the need to continue to be explicit about their benefits with teachers.

Another negative point brought up in the high school focus group came after asking participants what leadership practices they felt had the greatest impact on the learning environment. While teachers were discussing the amount of information provided to them regarding students, Milo had this to say:

On the heels of that, I would say I think what we really lack here is, we talk about it a lot, but don't really use data. And so I wonder a lot of times, what are these decisions being based on? Is it just anecdotal, is it two or three people said something so that's a big deal? And data is everywhere. It's everywhere, and I think if there were a little more leadership in that direction, we would be collecting, or we would be directed or maybe even given...guidance, or they could ask us what are you doing? Whatever, but you know a little more leadership in collecting data.

Despite Milo mostly not referring to relationships, this is worth mentioning since TSR data was the premise for his point of view. This also speaks to previous topics that were addressed in this chapter of how leaders need to continue to listen to their stakeholders in order to instigate a positive learning environment. The area of data collection and how to best put it to use was also a topic addressed in their reaccreditation visit with AdvancED, the only area in which the school did not receive high marks.

Lastly, when addressing the same question with the primary focus group, two local teachers made references to cultural awareness and the need for incoming administrators to not be too quick to instigate change. Here's what Janet said:

When talking about the different bosses that I've had in the different sections that I've had, sometimes I feel they make mistakes coming in and trying to change things that are working perfectly well because they come from a different environment, from a different culture, from a different school you know, and that is not very well seen lets say. They should not try to push new ideas that they bring the first year lets say. Then they can adapt, you know, people can bring new ideas fine and then combine them with how we work here. It has happened with several of my bosses that I've had through these years.

Nathan responded by stating:

I agree with Janet in what she says, sometimes school gets trapped in the rush of new pedagogies coming out, new methodologies and they want to catch up, they don't want to stay behind but they don't want to plan it out. They don't project it like ok, what's the impact of this and we've seen it happen. Sometimes they start

implementing a system and the next year they have to start from scratch with a new one because there was no projection to the future. Like how it's going to affect this positively or negatively and it does take a stress on the staff. You listen in the hallway, like ok, what's new now, what are we going to start working on now, what do we have to learn now. I'm all in for change, right, but it has to be planned. Becca said respectful before, and that way it's going to encounter less resistance from staff than it usually gets.

Janet and Nathan's points of view reiterate the need for leadership to be mindful of teacher needs, particularly if you are a new incoming administrator. Not the only ones to address this topic, those new to this environment could run into difficulties if the time isn't taken to acclimate to the strong school culture at Bolivar. Particularly from a leadership perspective, those not tuned in to the school culture will usually find resistance when trying to instigate change.

While this information served as an additional categorical bin and a critical lens for my interpretations, they are discrepancies that do not need to be resolved. However, according to Stake (2006), they do contribute to combating researcher bias, and provide context to certain leadership approaches.

***Sustainability.*** While the topic of sustainability was a broad one addressed by school leaders, I declined to extrapolate major findings related to it because I felt it would detract from the main purpose of the investigation. Nevertheless, the data collected from participants provides a large opportunity for follow-up studies regarding the subject. Even though participant data doesn't directly hit upon all the principles postulated by

Hargreaves and Fink (2006), mostly from lack of direction on my part, there are interesting findings that correlate to sustainable leadership principles, making the argument that the leadership themes uncovered at Colegio Bolivar should indeed be regarded as sustainable.

While attempting to correlate findings from this study to every principle postulated by Hargreaves and Fink (2006) is beyond the scope of this study, two principles do stand out regarding participant data. Beginning with *Length*, the second principle described in *Sustainable Leadership*, the authors state, “Sustainable leadership lasts. It preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of learning and life over time, year upon year, one leader to the next” (p. 55). While this principle speaks to the legacy of leaders, or a succession of leaders, it also implicitly speaks to longevity, a topic highlighted by almost all school leaders in this study. When asked what comes to mind when mentioning sustainable leadership, Sam stated the following:

Well, what I see is consistency and longevity in the positions of leadership, whether it be at the administration level or teacher leaders. I think there’s two factors there. One starts with Nick at the top and his predecessor, Dr. Felton... I mean, we’ve had two directors here for what? 40 years almost? Look at any other school in this region in Colombia. See that consistency at the top. Maybe you might get one other school. Then if you go down to the principals, you’re gonna see the same thing. I mean, Ken left and Ken was... he left after 8 years and I don’t think he expected that time. Now I’m on year 11. I almost feel like part of me, between you and I, feels like shoot, maybe I’ve been here too long. I

should move on rather than look like I'm comfortable. There's two parts that don't move is one, we're always doing different things here and progressive, so I can't get comfortable. And number two, why would I wanna change when I'm still happy? I think the leadership here is happy.

When asked the same question, Fin had this to say:

Bolivar, the deep sense of community and the values not just espoused but live every day values that we have, are because of a long line of long tenured directors at the school. 22 years as a principal and as a director for 16-17 years? (Referring to Nick) A long time. That is not common. It's not common in private schools, international schools, public schools. It's not common anywhere. When you look at...I'll take my experience in the United States. When you look at school districts who have sustained success over time, success that doesn't make sense, because you look at their student population, you look at the socioeconomics and you just think, "They're not supposed to be performing like that." A very common thread is consistency in leadership.

Despite most leaders making the argument for longevity as a sustainable leadership practice, oddly enough Nick was the only one to disagree. Nevertheless, longevity does seem to be an indicator of the level of happiness experienced by those working at Bolivar, their commitment to the institution, and its impact on developing relationships.

In the second chapter regarding principle 2, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) also make the argument for proper leadership succession. Arguing that successful succession depends on the capacity of leaders to accept and deal with their impending loss of power,



the authors also make the argument for planned continuity and for leaders to be explicit about succession. Hargreaves and Fink state that, “Planned continuity occurs when the assignment of a new principal to a school reflects a well-thought-out succession plan that is meant to build upon the general directions and goals of his or her predecessor” (2006, p. 63). The succession between Rachel and Ruby and the pre-primary section, and Ruby’s handling of her own transition are prime examples of this sustainable leadership principle in action at Colegio Bolivar.

Regarding *Depth*, the first principle postulated in *Sustainable Leadership*, Hargreaves and Fink state, “Sustainable leadership matters. It preserves, protects, and promotes deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others” (2006, p. 23). While one can make the argument that this study’s results regarding relationships speak for themselves regarding this first principle, I found it noteworthy that out of all the school leaders at Bolivar, it was Nick, the director, who disagreed with longevity being a key component of sustainability. Instead, he focuses on the broad learning for all as his main objective when he stated:

People confuse sustainability with longevity, I think, in particular, when it comes to directors and principals. I think sustainability... You can be in a position for a long time but it may not be sustainable and it may not be the best thing for a school but so many schools go, “Oh, if the principal can stay for a long time, he’ll continue to develop.” If there’s no forward progress, there’s no continual progress that’s going on, then how sustainable is that? I see schools where you’ve got people that are in the position for a long time but the school is stagnant. As

long as things are okay, then the parents or the board may be okay with that but it's not really sustainable. I don't believe in that kind of stuff. For me, sustainability is it has to be progress, continual progress, ongoing all the time. From a sustainable leadership standpoint, Colegio Bolivar leaders seem to understand that there is no point in sustaining learning that is trivial. Instead, they seem to comprehend that sustainable leadership is being aware of the nature and process of student learning, being directly and regularly involved with teachers and students in and out of the classroom, and promoting professional learning to continue to find ways to improve learning of students. Table 2 provides a definition of all seven sustainable leadership principles for further consideration as cited in Hargreaves and Fink (2006, pp. 23, 55, 95, 141, 159, 191, 225).

Table 2

*Seven principles of sustainable leadership.*

Principle	Description
1. Depth	Sustainable leadership matters. It preserves, protects, and promotes deep and broad learning for all in relationships of care for others.
2. Length	Sustainable leadership lasts. It preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of learning and life over time, year upon year, from one leader to the next.
3. Breadth	Sustainable leadership spreads. It sustains as well as depends on the leadership of others.

4. Justice	Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment by finding ways to share knowledge and resources with neighboring schools and the local community.
5. Diversity	Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity and avoids aligned standardization of policy, curriculum, assessment, and staff development and training in teaching and learning. It fosters and learns from diversity and creates cohesion and networking among its richly varying components.
6. Resourcefulness	Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources. It renews people's energy. Sustainable leadership is prudent and resourceful leadership that wastes neither its money nor its people.
7. Conservation	Sustainable leadership respects and builds on the past in its quest to create a better future.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to answer the following research questions: 1) What value do school leaders place on TSRs at Colegio Bolivar? and 2) How do leader practices influence the development of TSRs and the learning environment? By using a case study approach, it was possible to uncover a myriad of themes regarding leaderships' perspectives and approaches to creating a successful learning environment and addressing

their stakeholders' needs. Table 3 below provides an overview of the themes and subthemes uncovered in this study.

Table 3

*Identified themes and subthemes*

Theme 1: Genuine awareness and appreciation of the importance of relationships at Colegio Bolivar.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value placed on student relationships</li> <li>• Administrative expectations regarding TSRs</li> <li>• TSRs influence hiring practices and student placement</li> <li>• Time and resources provided for TSR development</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Success at Colegio Bolivar revolves around its emphasis on developing and supporting people.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapting to and addressing students' needs</li> <li>• Importance of autonomy</li> <li>• Listening to others</li> <li>• People are valued and cared for</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Administration visibility and approachability impact relationships and school climate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The importance of face-to-face interactions</li> <li>• Ensuring visibility early on</li> <li>• Consistency of visibility</li> </ul>

- Students expect and are glad to see administrators

Based on the identified themes and the findings presented in this chapter, it is easy to conclude that school leaders place a high value on TSRs at Colegio Bolivar. Beginning with their hiring practices and maintaining high expectations for their development throughout the school year, there is an awareness of their power to produce a positive learning environment. Furthermore, it is something for which they explicitly check and for which they provide resources. So much of their organizational structure is based on the sense of community and belonging, making TSRs a key component of their identity.

As for the second research question, there is a myriad of leadership practices that seem to positively influence TSR development and the learning environment at Colegio Bolivar. Apart from holding high expectations for TSRs, hiring teachers based on their ability to relate to students, and providing time and resources for TSR development, school leaders also ensure that all stakeholders' needs are met by ensuring they are heard, by providing them with autonomy in various facets of their teaching, and by ensuring that they feel valued and cared for. Additionally, administrators ensure they are consistently visible, constantly creating opportunities for others to interact with them whether it is for academic or non-academic matters. The themes identified above are a clear indication that while TSRs may not be the sole phenomenon on which they're focused, they

definitely make an explicit effort towards creating a positive environment conducive for relationships to take place and flourish.

The numerous rounds of analysis generated several findings, which hold important implications for practice and future research. In the following chapter, I present an argument of what was learned from this study, outline the implications of this research, expound on the limitations of the study, and share some conclusions.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The purpose of this study was to investigate what value school leaders place on teacher-student relationships and how their practices influence the development of relationships and the learning environment. Implemented in an international school in Cali, Colombia, this single case study design aimed to capture leaders' and teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding the TSRs in question, and how leadership actions influenced said phenomenon. This school was purposefully identified due to the researcher's experience as a former student and witness to the phenomenon of interest first hand. After the head of the school consented to participation, other school leaders were recruited to participate as well, who in turn also identified teachers to partake in focus groups. School leaders and teachers shared information regarding teacher-student relationships at Colegio Bolivar and leadership factors that impacted said relationships, as well as the learning environment. Each transcribed interview and focus group responses, alongside observational data and collected artifacts served as the foundation for the case study analysis. The themes that emerged from the several rounds of analysis are presented in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I present an argument of the importance and usefulness of these findings.

This chapter is organized into four segments. First, major findings that resulted from this research study will be summarized and discussed. Second, implications of

these findings are explored regarding both practice and theory. Third, limitations of this study are discussed. Lastly, I share my concluding thoughts regarding this investigation.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this research study, I interacted with the data through several rounds of coding: concurrent, holistic, and organizational, substantive, and theoretical coding. By combining the information provided by participants in interviews and focus groups, I extrapolated themes relating to the success of the research site from a leadership perspective. This comprehensive analysis has led me to the ensuing major findings, hopefully serving as recommendations to future leaders:

#### **Recommendation 1: Be explicit about focusing on relationships.**

In weighing the themes that arose during the analysis portion of the study, the importance of developing strong relationships among all community members is one that seems central to Colegio Bolivar's success. While the initial research focus revolved around teacher-student relationships, it was quickly assessed that relationships at all stakeholder levels are emphasized and deemed important. All participants highlighted the significance and prevalence of TSRs at Colegio Bolivar, even describing them as the strongest relationships experienced as a teaching professional and as part of the fabric of the institution. However, addressing the first research question, what stood out the most were the explicit efforts of the leadership team in ensuring TSRs were a school wide approach, reinforcing the espoused value they each initially indicated.

Two of the most significant factors that administrators seem to provide for their development are time and support. Most prevalent in the pre-primary and primary



sections, administrators and teachers both emphasized the importance of time needed for relationships to develop. All teachers in the primary focus group revealed at how great it was to not be responsible for any academics the first weeks of school. They all agreed how this took an immense pressure off of them and allowed them to really get to know their students on a personal level, and focus on strengthening social aspects of their classrooms. Even when discussing administrator check-ups of their classes, academics never seemed to be a main focus, instead checking if they've had enough morning circles on a given week. This administrative stance showcases the explicit importance they place on relationships, and their belief that they lead to a better learning environment.

In the middle school and high school sections, time is also provided to ensure interactions are taking place. While the emphasis on academics may be more pronounced early on, various days throughout the school year are solely dedicated for teacher and student interactions. Such days include middle school and high school sports days, several class trips by grade, and even *convivenicias*, which are day long or weekend long excursions with the sole goal of developing community through various games and exercises. New teachers in these focus groups were amazed that this was even a possibility at Colegio Bolivar, expressing how at previous schools one might have been laughed at for suggesting such a thing.

As for resources, the pre-primary and primary sections give every teacher a Morning Meeting Book, in which teachers can find a multitude of activities aimed at building and strengthening relationships. Functioning as a foundation to creating a sense of community in the classroom, exercises revolve around listening to others, developing

empathy, reinforcing student voice, promoting diversity and critical thinking, and establishing such interactions as routine. In the middle school and high school sections, this is replaced by the Advisory Program, aimed at providing students an additional space outside the confines of academics to also embrace and develop community within their grades. This program also serves as a resource for having yet another adult and advocate in the lives of students, providing an added avenue for relationships to ensue and one who can report additional information on individual students if needed.

Furthermore, all participants made reference as to how TSRs have become part of the hiring process. Mentioned by both administrators and teachers, this is another explicit practice of ensuring TSRs are a priority at Colegio Bolivar, a message that gets reinforced year after year. Interestingly enough, teachers are very aware that administrators actively search and hire others based on how they interact with students. Not only has this led to the continuous promotion of TSRs at school, but has also ensured positive interactions with like-minded people and a general consensus towards school's approach to education.

With similar familial relationships promoted between administrators and teachers or school staff, it is evident that clear efforts are taken in order to focus on relationships. To paraphrase Sam, while one may expect for positive relationships to develop naturally, they happen much faster and get much stronger when those interactions are facilitated. Whether it be with students or school staff, establishing strong relationships goes beyond simply expecting them. Conscientious efforts towards defining what kind of relationships you'd like to encounter, what resources are needed, and adopting it as

school culture requires a thought out long-term plan and execution. It is one that requires constant monitoring and tune up and an explicit focus for it to succeed.

**Recommendation 2: Focus on developing people in order to achieve school success.**

A second recommendation is ensure that you are developing people and that they feel they can grow and contribute. Professional development is a major resource through which school leaders can impact the learning environment. Administrators at Colegio Bolivar, even new ones, are acutely aware of this notion, adopting it as part of their strategic plan. However, providing PD for the sake of providing it is something that school leaders at this site are against. For some time now they have worked extensively on perfecting Professional Learning Communities (PLC's), with the notion that teachers should have a say in their own development. While high expectations are held of teachers, it is an environment geared towards empowering them through ample trust and resources.

At the heart of meeting others' needs is the wide spread promotion of autonomy and listening. Time and time again administrators emphasized these factors, a notion heavily supported by teacher testament. The idea of providing professional autonomy mirrors the needs of its promotion in healthy TSRs in the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Davis, 2003; 2006; Marshik, Ashton, & Algina, 2017). Autonomy is a factor enjoyed even at the highest levels of leadership, with the school superintendent emphasizing the leeway he's given from the board of directors to run school operations as he sees fit. This sense of autonomy trickles down to every other administrator, and is afforded to every

teacher. Entrusting that teachers will perform their duties, they are allowed to choose what professional development to partake in, even developing new forms of it if they see fit. Not only has this practice increased communal buy in to school's mission and vision, it also allows teachers the freedom to focus on and develop relationships as they see fit, usually promoting student autonomy themselves.

Another factor that goes hand in hand with autonomy and mentioned throughout participants' testimonies is leadership's ability to listen and take into account all stakeholder voices. Administrators even referenced encouraging students how to speak up for themselves and challenge authority, which in turn is the administrators themselves. Mentioned in previous chapters, listening is at the heart of school transformation. It is a skill that allows leaders to connect with others, to keep their finger on the pulse of daily occurrences at school, to empathize with their teachers and students, and to instigate change (Safir, 2017). While these factors may not speak to the promotion of TSRs directly, they do speak to a larger picture of creating a learning environment conducive to building or nurturing relationships. Not only is the leadership team focused on ensuring student needs are met, their staff and faculty's needs are also met in the process, inadvertently laying the foundations for relationships to form and flourish.

**Recommendation 3: Ensure you are visible as much as possible.**

One universal theme that emerged from all study participants was the fact that administrators were frequently visible. This consistency often leads to positive exchanges on a daily basis with all stakeholder groups of school, making it clear that leaders welcome contact and communication. Furthermore, it serves as exemplary

behavior for others to emulate regarding the benefit of positive interactions. Stressed by several administrators, and praised by several teachers, the importance placed on face-to-face interactions is key at Colegio Bolivar. While communicating with teachers or staff could easily be done via email or telephone, administrators stress the need to relay information in person as much as possible. Not only does it encourage dialogue, it also shows they care and want to take the time to talk to you. Moreover, it allows for additional interactions to take place with other stakeholders throughout the day, fortifying administrators' desire to being approachable and available.

Another component of visibility stressed by administrators is the need to be visible early on. This practice was especially poignant with early childhood students who are new to school, allowing them to establish a positive bond with administrators as well. Admin practices included taking the time to welcome new cohorts of students, whether to school or into their sections, establishing clear expectations, and getting to know their names as soon as possible. Establishing such practices early on not only contributes to students' sense of belonging and safety, it also lays the groundwork for such interactions with administrators in later sections, generating an expectation and ease surrounding said interactions.

Furthermore, the need to be consistent with being visible was an important factor uncovered in the study. While it is important to establish relationships and expectations early on, it is more important to ensure others see you often. All administrators emphasized the need to be outside their offices as much as possible during the beginning of the school day, during lunch and recesses, and when students are heading home. Most

teachers also referenced their administrator's high rate of visibility as a source of comfort and inspiration, finding their willingness to interact with others as a model to emulate.

According to Ellen (2012), effective administrators can no longer manage school from behind closed doors. Daily interactions with students, teachers, staff, and parents are needed nowadays to be an effective leader, both inside of school and within the school community at large. Whether it's to keep your finger on the pulse of what's occurring at an institution, to welcome stakeholder interaction, or to support others, a high rate of visibility is crucial to leadership success. Educational leaders are fundamental to establishing a positive school climate, school culture, and learning environment. Their visibility and approachability not only can have deep ramifications on the learning taking place, they can also serve as guides to establishing positive relationships in classrooms, and to extending those relationships to the larger context of school. The kind of example they set is easily noticed, and oftentimes, emulated.

### **Implications**

These research findings hold both practical and theoretical implications. These are described in the following sections.

**Practical implications.** Current and future school leaders can take away several lessons from the research findings previously mentioned. For starters, if one is seeking to rely on positive TSRs and school wide interactions, one cannot merely hope they will take place. An explicit effort needs to be undertaken to prioritize relationships. Furthermore, those efforts need to be supported by a well thought out plan and execution, and be emphasized routinely through expectations and by example. These actions need

to be adopted day in and day out in order for them to become part of the fabric of an institution.

Part of explicitly focusing on TSRs also requires a fair amount of resources and time. Administrators not only need to be skillful in the concept of TSRs, they also need to be adept in ensuring others can follow suit, which often times requires specific strategies for teachers to implement. Additionally, one has to recognize that building relationships takes time, and therefore time is a commodity that should be afforded to teachers to establish relationships.

School leaders also need to recognize that all relationships are not alike and not all teacher approaches are similar. Teachers need to experience a fair amount of autonomy not only in their teaching practices, but also in the manner in which they develop relationships with students. This requires administrators to place a high level of trust in teachers and for leaders to give them leeway in their practices, while still being able to hold high expectations.

Another important practice for ensuring positive interactions with students is ensuring that faculty and staff needs are met. Much like students, teachers and staff also need to experience autonomy, a sense of belonging, and feel they're listened to. Allowing teachers to have a say in their teaching practices as well as their development as a professional, increases their desire to partake in the school's mission and increases communal buy in. As a result, it also increases their desire to do better in their classrooms, leading to better relationships.

Lastly, it is evident in this study that leadership visibility plays a key role in the success of a school. Serving as an example of the relational values the leader espouses has a powerful effect on others, in turn making them want to follow the example. A leader that focuses on relationships with all stakeholders in return will inspire the same practice in others, leading relationships to become part of the culture of an institution.

**Implications for future research.** This research is in line with previous work supporting the effectiveness of positive teacher-student relationships (Pianta, 1994; 1999; Wentzel, 1997; 1998; Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; 2006; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). However, investigating TSRs from a leadership perspective is something that was not found in the existing literature. Therefore, this research yields implications for future research in the intersection of teacher-student relationships, leadership approaches, and sustainability. Even though an in-depth case study was conducted, there are still contextual settings worth exploring. The study could also be replicated in similar schools within the region, or in the city itself, or by incorporating a multiple case study approach. Furthermore, a more in-depth look into the adoption of leadership styles could also yield more specifics as to the ideal leadership approach to maximize the effectiveness of relationships.

Additionally, future research could expand the participant groups to include more voices. Specifically, such a study would benefit from incorporating stakeholder perspectives such as staff, parents, students and alumni. This research elected to focus on the leadership perspective in order to test the argument that a school would benefit from a



school wide promotion of TSRs, attempting to shift the focus of this phenomenon beyond the confines of the classroom.

Future research can also delve into connecting TSRs as a sustainable leadership practice. As stated before, “sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p.17). At this time of increased accountability, it is common for teachers to serve under a revolving number of principals, often times removed and replaced by impatient school boards seeking results (Cook, 2014). The respective leadership in schools directly impacts teachers and their professional practice. Therefore, sustainable leadership practices need to exist in order for there to be a strong school culture and a consistent implementation of rigorous practices. Perspectives on sustainable leadership were directly collected from participants in this study, but are outside the scope of the research questions and goal of the investigation. Nevertheless, administrators make a compelling argument between processes adopted, teacher and leadership longevity, and the need for constant improvement as major components of sustainable leadership, incorporating teacher-student relationships in those arguments. According to Glickman (2002), sustainable leadership seeks to create lasting advances in learning, rather than focus on short-term gains in test scores. Congruent with views of transformational leadership that support the importance of developing a collaborative school culture based on common held beliefs, values, and goals, sustainable leadership is also developed, communicated, and nurtured within a culture of shared understanding.

Leadership practices at Colegio Bolivar all indicate that strong interpersonal relationships amongst its stakeholders are a common held belief and expectation, making the argument of relying on them as a sustainable leadership practice. Nevertheless, this study provided a snapshot of the experiences at one school setting that incorporates TSRs in their school vision. There are many environments and perspectives that can further illuminate findings about this work.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what value school leaders place on teacher-student relationships and how their practices influenced the development of relationships and the learning environment. As important as these purposes may be, the methodological approach for this study did encounter some limitations. For starters, the study is limited to only one school. Even though there are similar U.S. accredited institutions in other cities of Colombia, I opted for one where I believed there was a prevalent focus on the development of positive TSRs. Secondly, participants only included school leaders and a small number of teachers. While the study does aim to address leadership practices, it could have benefited from attempting to capture other stakeholder perspectives. By choosing to limit the participants to those in leadership positions and the few teachers they helped select for focus groups, I potentially ignored other valid viewpoints regarding TSRs. Furthermore, while the amount of teachers interviewed was greater than the number originally proposed, they still may not be representative of the majority of teachers' perspectives regarding the issues at hand. The study would have also benefitted from a random selection of teachers to participate in the

focus groups instead of selecting them through snowball and purposive sampling, possibly reducing or eliminating systematic bias.

Another limitation was the potential for self-reporting that arises from interviewing participants. Given my history with the institution, leaders and teachers may have felt pressured to enhance their experiences at this site, particularly if they felt pressured to participate. Their answers may have not been fully honest if they felt their responses would reflect negatively on school or if they could be easily identified.

My own position as a participant observer may also be seen as a limitation. While my coursework in my doctoral program has expanded my research identity and competency, I have maintained an interest in the subject at hand throughout my graduate program. In addition to being enthusiastic about teacher-student relationships, as a graduate of the research site, I also hold it in high regard. I am a product of Colegio Bolivar and my family's name has been connected with it for over two decades.

Lastly, while case studies can highlight phenomena in particular contexts and produce thorough understandings, a prevailing limitation is that they lack generalizability (Yin, 2016). For my study, I elected one site with specific cultural connotations within and outside of school. Other school cultures and cultural differences within Colombia could provide additional findings.

## **Conclusion**

In a society that has a history of solely focusing on accountability and results, it is important to recognize external factors that play a key role in student success. While literature on teacher-student relationships has existed for several decades, there seems to

be no existing attempts at connecting TSRs to the greater school context. In order for TSRs to thrive on a greater scale, leadership and explicit action is needed to prioritize them and to adopt them as part of school culture. But results of this case study call for leaders to emphasize relationships at all stakeholder levels, ultimately driving results by increasing communal buy in, reinforcing feelings of belonging, and instilling a strong sense of community. A careful analysis of this research site provides a valuable learning experience that can benefit any learning institution. Instead of making relationships the focus of classrooms and expect them to pour outwards, embrace all stakeholders as a whole and watch relationships flourish from within.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Informed Consent Letter**

The following letter will be sent electronically to all participants approximately two weeks before their scheduled interviews. Paper copies will also be provided the day of the interview in case the electronic copy was not returned, or for additional participants identified by snowball sampling. Participants will be asked to review all the information and sign if they agree to the terms described below:

### **SENSE OF BELONGING, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP: AN INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY.**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

##### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to determine how school leaders often focus on relationships as a sustainable leadership practice for school improvement. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to partake in an hour-long face-to-face interview that will prompt you to describe your leadership experiences at your school that relate to teacher-student interactions and how they might differ from other educational settings in which you have worked.

##### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

##### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in sustainable leadership and contribute to teacher-student relationship literature from a leadership perspective.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. You will not be asked to disclose your name at any time and a pseudonym will be used to describe your school and your position within your school. Your identity will be known only to me and will only be linked to your pseudonym on a single identification key of which I will have sole access. Following protocol, your interview will be saved in a password protected electronic folder for a minimum of 5 years, after which it will be deleted.

**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Steven Nagy, a doctoral student in the Education Leadership department at George Mason University. He may be reached at 843-819-0155 or snagy2@gmu.edu for questions or to report a research related problem. The investigator's faculty advisor is Dr. Robert Smith, who may be reached at 703-993-5079. You may contact George Mason University Institutional Review Board office at 703-993-4121 if you have any questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form, all of my questions have been answered by the research staff, and I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to audio taping.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to audio taping.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Signature

## APPENDIX B

### Administrators' Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The following semi-structured interview protocol reflects the initial questions that will be asked of each of the participants.

- 1) Can you tell me about your experiences that led you to teaching here at Colegio Bolivar?
  - a. How long have you been at this institution/current role?
  - b. Where were you before?
  - c. Is this your first job in an international setting?
- 2) As a foreign hire, how was your transition at this school?
  - a. Can you describe an experience that stood out regarding your colleagues?
  - b. Can you describe an experience that stood out regarding the students in your corresponding section?
- 3) How would you describe the learning environment at this school?
  - a. Can you think of another school you have worked at that has a similar environment?
  - b. Is there anything specific to this school that draws your attention regarding the learning environment?
- 4) I want you think of a time when you had a positive interaction with a student or a group of students. Will you describe what that interaction looked like?
  - a. Are these types of interactions common here?
  - b. Did you experience similar interactions in the other schools prior to this one?
  - c. If you do find these interactions to be different, what do you attribute them to?
  - d. Can you describe a similar interaction between a student and a teacher in your section?
  - e. How do you perceive interactions between students and school staff to affect the learning environment at this school?
- 5) What comes to mind when I say sustainable leadership?
  - a. Are there any concepts that stand out to you?

- b. Of those concepts, do you aim to implement any in your day-to-day practice?
- 6) Regarding your practice as a school administrator, what comes to mind when I mention the concept of teacher-student relationships?
  - a. To what extent have teacher-student relationships been a benefit to this learning environment?
  - b. To what extent do you keep teacher-student relationships in mind when making leadership decisions?
- 7) When talking about school improvement, oftentimes you hear about the efforts made to enhance the conditions under which learning takes place. Apart from providing training, resources, or other materials, what else is a main part of your focus regarding school improvement?
- 8) Can you share any additional experiences or stories regarding the impact relationships have in your day-to-day duties as principal?



## APPENDIX C

### Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Could you each give a brief history of yourself, how you ended up at Colegio Bolivar, what you teach and how long have you been at Colegio Bolivar?
2. As I briefly mentioned to you all, my research interests revolve around teacher-student relationships. What would you say is the nature of TSRs at Colegio Bolivar?
  - a. To what extent, if at all, do they differ from other institutions you've worked at?
  - b. What kind of impact would you say TSRs have had in your classrooms?
  - c. What do you believe to be the greatest contributing factors of this phenomenon at CB?
3. From your interactions with administrators during your time here, what value would you say they place on teacher-student relationships in their day-to-day practices?
4. What leadership practices do you feel have the greatest impact on the learning environment at CB?
5. I want you to think of a time at CB where you really had a great interaction or experience with a student or group of students. Can you describe what it was like?

## APPENDIX D



### Office of Research Development, Integrity, and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia  
22030 Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: November 14, 2018

TO: Robert Smith, PhD  
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [1337871-1] Sense of Belonging, School Climate, and Teacher-Student Relationships Through Sustainable Leadership: An International Case Study

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: November 14, 2018  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form unless the IRB has waived the requirement for a signature on the consent form or has waived the requirement for a consent process. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the IRB office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable).

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This study does not have an expiration date but you will receive an annual reminder regarding future requirements.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project.

Please note that department or other approvals may be required to conduct your research in addition to IRB approval.

If you have any questions, please contact Katie Brooks (703) 993-4121 or kbrook14@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

GMU IRB Standard Operating Procedures can be here: <https://rdia.gmu.edu/topics-of-interest/human-or-animal-subjects/human-subjects/human-subjects-sops/>

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

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