Exploring teacher perceptions of factors that impact on their relationships with students through the lens of mentalisation.

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Abstract

The contribution of positive teacher-student relationships to student wellbeing and academic outcomes is widely accepted. These relationships are recognised as essential for developing students’ connectedness to school and engagement in learning. This study investigated the factors that teachers perceive as impacting on their relationships with students, and examined these factors through the lens of mentalisation. A qualitative investigation was undertaken in which eight participants were invited to reflect on their relationships with students. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a focus group and researcher observation. Two key factors were identified: reflection on relationship experiences and the presence of a safe and supportive environment. Interwoven within each of these factors are the notions of reciprocity and resilience. The findings suggest that the capacity of teachers to develop healthy teacher-student relationships may be enhanced if they are provided with opportunities to make sense of their prior relationship experiences, and work within school cultures and structures that prioritise the value of relationships. This study suggests that teachers can assist students in developing their capacity to more fully participate in this model of relationship by providing students with a safe and supportive environment. The findings also highlight the reciprocal nature of the healthy teacher-student relationship as these relationships may in turn positively influence the teacher’s sense of wellbeing and increase their capacity to meet the challenges of the educational environment with resilience. Mentalisation theory, which incorporates and extends the notions of empathy and mindfulness, provided a valuable framework to examine and interpret the factors that impact on teacher-student relationships. This study has implications for pre-service training and teacher professional learning. Approaches that encourage reflection on the dynamics of relationships and the contribution of one’s own relationship experiences to one’s relationship with students may strengthen a teacher’s capacity to develop healthy relationships with students and may contribute to the teacher’s own sense of wellbeing.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the masters,

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,

iii. The thesis is less than 22000 words in length, exclusive of tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed __________________

Margaret Nixon
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background to this Study

When I initially began working in the area of wellbeing at a Victorian primary school I was asked to implement a social and emotional learning (SEL) program for the students. After sourcing a manualised classroom program with evidence of positive outcomes in the areas of academic and SEL, I started working with the school community. It quickly became apparent that the key to implementing the program with fidelity lay with the teachers. My observation lead to the conclusion that regardless of the specific SEL program, if teachers had little understanding or acknowledgement of the role of emotions within the classroom, or if they were anxious about issues related to the exploration of emotions, the outcomes of the program would be impacted. It was with interest that I read research on SEL programs which identified that their effectiveness is dependent on the quality of implementation by the classroom teacher and the emotional capacity of that teacher (Biggs, Vernberg, Twemlow, Fonagy, & Dill, 2008; Nind & Weare, 2009; Payton, et al., 2008). This reading also suggested that it was not just the emotional comfort of the teacher, but also the model of relationship between teacher and the students that impacted the effectiveness of SEL programs. My observation and further reading prompted me to question whether there were common characteristics and practices in teachers effectively implementing SEL programs in their classroom.

At this time I was also introduced to the concept of mentalisation and the work of Peter Fonagy (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2004) and Stuart Twemlow (Twemlow & Sacco, 2008). Mentalisation is the capacity to enter into imaginative mindreading of both self and others through consideration of thoughts, desires and beliefs (Jurist, Slade,
& Bergner, 2008). As I researched this theory, the potential impact of the teacher’s capacity to mentalise went beyond ensuring fidelity and outcome of SEL. The literature indicated that the capacity to mentalise is developed through positive relationships and provides the foundation on which a person’s capacity for flexibility, turn taking, empathy, resilience, self-worth and risk-taking is developed (Allen, Bleiberg, & Haslam-Hopwood, 2003). These are key capacities in students’ learning and the foundation for future positive relationships with peers and beyond the classroom.

So what began as an investigation in how to engage reticent teachers in implementing SEL programs has lead to investigating the factors that impact on teacher-student relationships through the lens of mentalisation. It is hoped that this study will contribute to supporting teachers in developing positive teacher-student relationships and influencing student social, emotional and academic outcomes.

Before continuing I must comment on the term ‘mentalisation’. I initially found the term very clumsy, clinical and alienating. When I spoke with other teachers the term was often confused with issues of mental illness. One teacher said to me: “I feel like it is a term that belongs in the old asylums”. However, I believed the theory of mentalisation with its focus on the self and the other held great potential as a framework for relationships. To avoid being distracted by negative overtones associated with the term I adopted the phrase ‘mindful awareness’ during the recruiting phase of the research.
1.2 The Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was to identify factors that teachers perceive as impacting on teacher-student relationships. It was also to employ the concept of mentalisation to examine and interpret these factors. The research questions that informed this exploratory study were:

1. What factors do teachers identify as impacting on their capacity to establish and maintain positive teacher-student relationships?

2. What can the theory of mentalisation contribute to the examination and interpretation of these factors?

1.3 Scope and Significance of the Study

This study recognises the importance of teacher-student relationships in terms of student wellbeing and academic outcomes (Meyer & Turner, 2007; Tobell & O Donnell, 2012). The importance of including issues of wellbeing such as the emotional nature of teaching, the role of relationships, and connectedness and learning during the pre-service time is noted by a number of scholars (Cohen, 2006; Hargreaves, 2001; Weare, 2004). There is a call for teachers’ ongoing social and emotional learning as a fundamental factor for the work carried out with students (Cohen, 2006; Giles, Smythe & Spence, 2012; Jennings, 2011; Jennings & Greenburg, 2008). Spilt, Koomen and Thijs (2011) suggest that the relationship between the teacher and the student not only contributes to student outcomes but is also “… the most likely source of fulfilment of the need for belongingness” and is therefore an important contributor to a teacher’s sense of wellbeing (p. 463).
The study contributes to the development of approaches that support teachers in developing healthy and sustainable relationships with their students. These approaches could be incorporated into pre-service training and through ongoing teacher professional learning.

1.4. Glossary of Key Terms

Mentalisation
Mentalisation describes the way in which humans make sense of their social world by holding in mind the needs, desires, beliefs and goals that underpin their own and other’s behaviours in interpersonal interactions (Fonagy, Bateman & Bateman, 2011a; Fonagy & Luyton, 2009).

Attachment Theory
Attachment theory is the understanding that children seek proximity to caregivers that allows them to feel secure while they explore the world around them (Bowlby, 1991).

Teacher-Student Relationships
Within this study the term teacher-student relationship refers to the understanding that a relationship is established between the teacher and the student within the learning environment. The term healthy teacher-student relationship is used in this study to describe a reciprocal relationship between a teacher and student that underpins social interaction and contributes to creating a sense of meaning, value and wellbeing in the teacher and student through a process of holding the self and other in mind.

Psychoanalytic Thinking
Psychoanalytic thinking is founded on the observation that individuals are often unaware of the factors that determine their patterns of thought, emotions and behaviour and can affect current relationships. Psychoanalytic therapy explores these unconscious
factors through a process of the patient and analyst working “… together to build up a safe and trusting relationship that enables the patient to experience aspects of his or her inner life that have been hidden because they are painful, embarrassing, or guilt-provoking” (American Psychoanalytic Association 2019-2014).

**Inner Working Model**

The inner (internal) working model is the understanding of self, others and self-other interactions that individuals construct internally through experiences. It is developed through primary relationships, and is the lens through which an individual interprets and experiences subsequent relationships (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006).

**Teacher Reflection**

Within this study teacher reflection refers to “… active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice” (Dewey as cited in Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 9). It involves teachers participating in a process of engaging their capacity to think about themselves, their experiences and to be attuned to their own feelings (Day, 2004; Salzberger-Wittenberg & Osbourne, 1999).

**Empathy**

Empathy is the process through which a person seeks to encounter and enter into the mental states of others (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008).

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is the process of acceptance and openness to experience in the present. It involves the skills of observing, describing, acting with awareness and accepting without judging (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, Carmody et al., 2004).

**Resilience**

Resilience describes a person’s capacity to do well despite experiencing difficulties (Pianta & Walsh, 1998).
Having introduced this study it is now essential to review the relevant literature on the theory of mentalisation in order to identify its possible contribution to examining factors that impact on teacher-student relationships.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study sought to identify the factors perceived by teachers that impact on teacher-student relationships. These factors were then examined through the lens of mentalisation. The literature review provides the theoretical construct necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the findings.

This literature review begins with an examination of the concept of mentalisation; including a consideration of definitions, origin and a review of its developmental theory with a particular focus on neuroscience, attachment theory and theory of mind. The review draws from literature within the clinical fields of neuroscience and psychoanalysis and the field of education.

2.2 What is Mentalisation?

There is, as yet, no agreed definition of mentalisation. Peter Fonagy and colleagues have contributed extensively to the thinking and understanding of mentalisation over the past 20 years (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008; Fonagy et al., 2011a; Fonagy et al. 2004; Fonagy & Luyton, 2009; Jurist, 2010; Twemlow, Fonagy & Sacco 2005). Fonagy et al. (2011a) concede, “Our knowledge about the extent of human mentalising remains rudimentary” (p. 107). However, Fonagy claims that mentalisation describes the way humans make sense of their social world by imagining the mental states that underpin their own and other’s behaviour in interpersonal interactions (Jurist, 2010). It is the capacity to enter into imaginative mindreading of both self and others through
consideration of thoughts, desires and beliefs. It involves the process of thinking about what the self is thinking and thinking about what another person is thinking (Allen et al. 2003; Bragin & Bragin, 2010; Jurist et al., 2008). Mentalisation is a dynamic, multifaceted mental capacity, which allows us to perceive and interpret human behaviour through needs, desires, beliefs and goals (Fonagy et al., 2011a; Fonagy & Luyton, 2009).

Fonagy and Luyton (2009) argue that mentalisation is characterised by “four functional polarities” (see Appendix A), each of which is related to distinct neural systems (see Appendix B) (pp. 1358-1362). The polarities are:

1. Implicit-Explicit. Implicit refers to automatic responses involving the holding of our own and other’s thoughts in mind. Explicit refers to the deliberate and conscious act of imagining the mental states of another.

2. Internally focussed-Externally focussed. The focus on the internal polarity is the consideration of thoughts, feelings and experiences while the external polarity refers to the consideration of the physical and visible features or actions.

3. Self orientated-Other orientated. The mentalisation between the self and other is a dynamic process involving the thoughts, intentions, motives, desires, beliefs and needs of each.

These functional polarities provide us with a framework to understand the concept of mentalisation. Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008), responding to the work of Fonagy, conclude that an individual’s capacity to mentalise is dependent on their ability to balance each of the polarities. It involves “… unconscious, automatic and conscious deliberate applications of one’s capacity to understand both cognitive and affective aspects of one’s own and others’ mental states” (p. 1132).

2.2.1 Empathy and mindfulness: Conceptual cousins.

Choi and Gunderson (2008) refer to concepts and practices that share similar characteristics with mentalisation as “conceptual cousins” (p. 1130), a term originally coined by Allen (2006). They refer to four ‘conceptual cousins’, namely mindfulness, psychological mindedness, empathy and affect consciousness. For the focus of this research we will very briefly review the concepts of empathy and mindfulness given their relevance within the education literature and school practice.

Empathy is often seen as putting oneself in another’s shoes. This resonates with Freud’s understanding of placing ourselves in the position of the other in regard to their mental state (Ensik & Mayes, 2010). Decety and Jackson (2006) define empathy as “… the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person” (p. 54). They identify three key components of empathy: an affective response to another person that usually, though not always, entails sharing the person’s emotional state, a cognitive capacity for perspective taking, and a degree of emotional regulation.

Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008) conclude that both empathy and mentalisation take into account the mental states of others. Empathy is other-oriented, involving a person
encountering and entering into the mental states of others through empathic concern. In comparison, mentalisation is more equally balanced between self and others. They also conclude that empathy is more implicit than explicit, although not exclusively, and involves a greater emphasis on the affective rather than the cognitive realm.

Mindfulness involves the skills of observing, describing, acting with awareness and accepting without judging. Bishop et.al. (2004) draw on the work of many scholars and conclude that in broad terms mindfulness can be described as “… a kind of non elaborative, non judgemental, present centred awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attention field is acknowledged and accepted as it is” (p. 232). This concept has been characterised as including attention regulation, and acceptance and openness to experience.

Mindfulness and mentalisation both incorporate the directing of one’s attention to the experience of self as a means to regulate impulsivity. They also both incorporate the presence of affective and cognitive aspects of mental states. Allen, Fonagy and Bateman (2008) write “Mindfulness promotes mentalising skills in the sense of enhancing awareness of thoughts and feelings and it promotes a mentalising stance by drawing attention to the unceasing flux of mental states” (p. 14). Bishop et al. (2004) acknowledges the association between reflective functioning [the operationalisation of mentalisation (Fonagy et al., 2004)] and mindfulness through both endeavouring to “… step outside of the automated mode of perceptual processing and attending to the minute details of mental activity that might otherwise escape awareness” (Bishop, et al., 2004, p. 235). However, unlike mentalisation, mindfulness operates within the polarity of explicit actions focused on the self. Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008) discuss the
elements of difference noting that mindfulness encompasses the interaction with inanimate objects and focuses on the present, while mentalisation is concerned with the past, present and the future. The aim of mindfulness is to lead to an acceptance of the internal experiences, where, in contrast, mentalisation is focused on making sense of, and constructing meaning and understanding of those internal mental states (Allan, 2008; Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008). Thus mindfulness has a greater focus on the self with a stronger emphasis on the cognitive (Fonagy et al., 2011a).

Although there are similarities, mentalisation goes beyond empathy and mindfulness through integrating the practice of empathising with self into the process (Allan, 2008) and extending the notion of mindfulness by encompassing reflection on past, present and future (see Figure 1).

Having reviewed the definition of mentalisation, an examination of the characteristics of this capacity will assist our understanding of the theory and its contribution to the investigation of factors that impact on teacher-student relationships.
2.2.2 Characteristics of the capacity to mentalise.

Allen et al. (2003) believe mentalisation is vital to our sense of wellbeing. Mentalisation is the means by which we gain a sense of agency where we feel we are in control of what is happening and the choices we make. Allen et al. (2003) claim that mentalisation is not only the basis for a sense of self, but it is also the basis for healthy and sustainable relationships. They refer to mentalisation as “intuitive empathy” (p. 16) with others and ourselves and suggests that this is the cornerstone of positive relationships. For Allen (2006) this relationship is one where there is a meeting of the minds; where one feels s/he is important to the other and matters to the other. Engaging within a mentalising relationship allows for each party to learn from each other.

Bragin and Bragin (2010) refer to the work on theories of resilience to highlight the contribution that a secure base and the meeting of minds, found within mentalising
relationships, can add to the development of resilience. Fonagy et al. (20011a) associate the development of mentalisation with a child’s capacity to “show increased resilience to stressful social situations” (p. 100). He claims, mentalisation, through its development of an understanding of self, and an empathetic connection with others provides protective factors in situations of loss grief and trauma. This sense of autonomy and connectedness with others contributes to the ability to respond to negative experiences with a greater flexibility. Allen et al. (2003) write: It allows us to “… generate the two most protective experiences human beings can produce: hope and meaning” (p. 16) and provides an opportunity to be open to change and to draw on others for support. Pianta and Walsh (1998) also identify the contribution of positive relationships in the development of resilience. They argue that resilience is not taught through a set of skills, but is a process involving interactions among systems over time. Relationships with adults are part of the system of interactions and are seen as resources in the process of resilience. They write, “… a supportive relationship with an adult is one of the single most commonly identified protective factors in the literature on resilience” (p. 414).

Allen et al. (2003) list the characteristics of a person who mentalises as the following: the capacity to make meaning of adversity; the ability to sustain a positive outlook with hope, the ability to show initiative and acceptance; the evidence of a sense of agency derived from feeling responsible for one’s own behaviour; the possession of a sense of purpose; the desire to engage in healing and inspiring rituals based on shared values; the ability to communicate and solve problems by seeking clarification and speaking the truth; the capacity for flexibility and humour; the capacity to feel connected and to give and receive support; the capacity to be open to emotional expression; the willingness to
share a full range of feelings; and the capacity for mutual empathy which allows one to see one’s own perspective and that of another. Mentalisation is a communal event drawing on the understanding that there are various perspectives on the one outer reality (Allan, 2006).

An inability to mentalise can lead to inflexibility: being unable to think about or embrace other possibilities and leading us to remain on a merry-go-round (Allen et al., 2003). Fonagy, Luyten and Strathearn (2011b) identify an association between children who have been maltreated and a reduced capacity to mentalise. They draw on extensive studies to highlight that in contrast with non-maltreated children, maltreated children are less able to engage in symbolic and dyadic play, fail to show empathy with distressed children and, in conversations, will less often refer to emotional states. The maltreated child also has a limited understanding of facial expressions for the universally recognised emotions, a delayed development of a theory of mind, and displays a delay in the development of emotion-focussed mentalisation. Allen et al. (2003) write of the positive association between the capacity to mentalise and coping with disorders such as depression and contributing to a decrease in psychiatric disorders in those who have experienced childhood trauma (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008; Fonagy et al., 2011a; Fonagy & Luyton, 2009).

Our understanding of mentalisation and the characteristics associated with it may be further deepened through an examination of the theories that have contributed to its development.
2.2.3 The development of the capacity to mentalise.

Mentalisation, as a concept, dates back to French psychoanalyst who noted the failure of psychosomatic patients to symbolise mental states in others. This observation, in combination with philosophy of the mind, laid the foundation for the understanding of mentalisation today (Jurist et al., 2008). The current theory of the development of the capacity to mentalise draws upon, and weaves together, the fields of:

1. Neuroscientific research, with its focus on the link between the mind and the brain, and the affect of early relationships on neurological development.
2. Theory of mind within the areas of developmental psychology and philosophy.
3. Attachment theory with its understanding of the potential impact of relationships on promoting and hindering the capacity to mentalise.

In maintaining our focus on literature which contributes to the examination of factors that impact on teacher-student relationships, the fields of neuroscience and theory of mind will be discussed briefly, while attachment theory will be examined more closely.

Through the development of techniques such as neuroimaging, the development of a child’s brain in response to an environment of nurture, such as a secure attachment relationship, has been identified (Fonagy et al., 2011b; Giedd, 2003; Schore, 2001). “Each brain is dependent on the scaffolding of caretakers and loved ones for its survival, growth, and wellbeing” (Cozolino, 2006, p. 6). The connection between secure attachment relationships and the strengthening of the neural transmitters within the critical period of a child’s development is recognised. During this time, interpersonal experiences contribute to the long-term development and wellbeing of a
child’s brain through the development of the right brain regulatory capacities. This includes the areas of the brain associated with the process of social-emotional information, and responding and regulating stress (Cozolino, 2006; Giedd, 2003; Schore, 2001). Cozolino (2006) argues that the brain continues to develop and change and that social interaction is a powerful force in influencing brain regulation, growth and health. These relationships not only contribute to brain development, but also provide the necessary energy for growth and survival. Throughout life social interaction within a meaningful relationship can “… reactivate neuroplastic processes and actually change the structure of the brain” (p. 8).

Theory of mind is the second field of study contributing to the theory of mentalisation (Ensik & Mayes, 2010; Fonagy et al., 2011a; Jurist, 2010). Theory of mind refers to the quest of “…understanding the ability, which may not be exclusively human, to predict and explain the actions of self and others based on their knowledge, beliefs and desires” (Ensink & Mayes, 2010, p. 301). Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008) refer to theory of mind as “… mental faculties that allow an individual to first appreciate the existence of different mental states in others and then to accurately identify other’s mental states (e.g., intentions, motives, beliefs, desires, and feelings) in order to interpret their behaviour” (p. 1129). Peter Fonagy et al. (2004) and Jurist (2010) proposed an integration of psychoanalytic thinking, and the understanding of the role of the caregiver in a secure attachment relationship, as contributing to the child’s capacity to ultimately make sense of another’s mind and then their own.

Fonagy and Luyton (2009) argue that the quality of the attachment relationship is linked to the development of the capacity to mentalise. This theory is particularly relevant
within our study. In brief, attachment theory is the understanding that children seek proximity to caregivers, which allows them to feel secure while they explore the world around them. The most influential contributor to the development of attachment theory is Bowlby (1991) who stated “… it is believed that observation of how a very young child behaves towards his mother, both in her presence and especially in her absence, can contribute greatly to our understanding of personality development” (p. 3). The term caregiver now replaces ‘mother’ to remove the gender bias.

It is this attachment relationship that contributes to the development of the capacity to mentalise. “A mind comes into existence by means of receiving appropriate input from a caregiver” (Jurist, 2010, p. 291). Bion (1993) first discussed the mother’s (caregiver’s) capacity to manage the baby’s powerful feelings through the notion of container–contained theory in his article “Attack on Linking”. It is the process through which “Projective identification makes it possible for him to investigate his own feelings in a personality powerful enough to contain them” (p. 106). It is through the close emotional bond, or secure attachment base, that children are able to explore both their inner and outer world. An infant in a secure relationship relies on the caregiver’s assistance in detecting and containing his/her strong emotions (Cozolino, 2006). The caregiver’s role is to make sense of emotions and to provide a mirror for the child to view this sense making (Fonagy & Luyton, 2009). This assists the development of understanding firstly of another’s mind, which is a necessary requirement for children to then understand their own mind (Allen et al., 2003; Bragin & Bragin, 2010; Jurist, 2010).
The capacity to attach and reattach to different groups is developed and refined throughout our lives. However to develop sustainable relationships and to navigate the complexities of social interactions, we also have to develop the ability to regulate our impulses and emotions (Cozolino, 2006). This is what is known as affect regulation, which is the capacity to balance and manage the impulses and stressors of everyday life, while keeping an understanding of future consequences. It allows us to flexibly solve problems, keep ourselves in mind and consider the other’s needs and perspectives (Cozolino, 2006) (see also Fonagy et al., 2004). A secure attachment facilitates the development of affect regulation.

According to Fonagy et al. (2004) affect regulation in turn leads to the development of mentalised affectivity: a process involving awareness of feelings and thinking about those feelings simultaneously (Allen et al., 2003; Fonagy & Luyton, 2009; Jurist, 2010). This capacity allows control over the intensity and duration of emotions and the development of an ability to express our emotions in a manner conducive to positive relationships (Allen et al., 2003; Jurist, 2010).

Cozolino (2006) lists the characteristics that result from a secure attachment experience as: the sense of positive regard for self; the capacity to trust others; an ability to regulate our emotions; the capacity to maintain a positive outlook; and the ability to use both an emotional understanding and intellectual ability in moment to moment responses to issues.

Research by Fonagy et al. (2011b) highlights the complex relationship between the attachment experience and brain development not only for the child, but also the
caregiver. It is through relationships that a person is able to nurture and be nurtured and to interact and support others. Cozolino (2006) suggests that humans need to do this to survive. “Our brains are structured and restructured with our interactions with our social and natural environments” (p. 81). In providing this care and developing a relationship with the child, the parent’s brain also receives nurture. The child–parent bond contributes to the activation and growth of the parent’s brain. It is a meeting of the minds.

The attachment relationship guides the child in responding to, and making sense of times of stress or challenge. Repeated experiences of this movement from regulated-unregulated-regulated in the child’s life strengthens the experience-dependent plasticity of the neurons and develops in the child the platform needed to regulate and navigate life situations (Cozolino, 2006). “Thus, positive parent-child interactions establish an environment within the brain that maximizes positive emotional rebound as well as neural growth and affect regulation” (p. 87). The ‘good-enough mother’ (caregiver) is one who makes active adaption to the infants needs that gradually lessen according to the infant’s growing ability to account for failure of adaption and to tolerate the results of frustration (Winnicott, 1991). Through the process of consistent and responsive parenting the child’s brain develops appropriately, allowing the child to “…be part of the group mind through social awareness and appropriate affect regulation” (Cozolino, 2006, p. 96). Figure 2 provides a representation of the essential elements from each of the theories that inform the theory of mentalisation.
We have examined the origin and development of mentalisation, however the literature also suggests that there are certain environmental pre-conditions that impact on the ability to exercise this capacity.

2.2.4 Environmental pre-conditions for mentalising.

Our examination of the concept of mentalisation, its definition, its characteristics and its origin and theory of development reveals that the capacity to mentalise is influenced by relationship experiences and subsequent neurological development, the capacity to consider the mind of another and the attachment experience. However a key precondition enabling the activation of the capacity to mentalise is dependent on the circumstances in which a person finds themselves (Fonagy et al., 2011a).
The experiencing of an emotionally safe and supportive environment has been identified as an essential pre-condition for a person to exercise their capacity to mentalise (Twemlow et al., 2005). An emotionally safe and supportive environment enables a person to experience a sense of being valued and held within trusting, secure and reciprocal relationships (Allen et al., 2003). An emotionally unsafe environment is characterised by a person feeling threatened, anxious or in a state of emotional arousal.

Experiencing an unsafe environment has bearing on the neurological functioning associated with mentalising and activates the self-protective ‘fight or flight’ neurological circuitry leading to a reduction in cognitive capacity. This self-protective response results in a focus on self, thus reducing a person’s capacity to bring to mind the desires, feelings and beliefs of others, a vital process within mentalisation (Alan et al., 2008; Cozolino, 2006; Twemlow et al., 2005).

As indicated previously one of the functioning polarities of mentalisation is Implicit-Explicit. Implicit is the automatic responses involving the holding of our own and others’ thoughts. Explicit refers to the deliberate and conscious act of imagining the mental states of others (Allen et al., 2003; Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008). When experiencing a level of threat or anxiety it is suggested that the explicit element of mentalisation is diminished. This can result in a returning to common held responses and practices that may lack the reflective process of mentalisation (Allen et al., 2003).

In setting the context of this study, the literature thus far has identified that mentalisation is a dynamic, multifaceted mental capacity where a person is thinking about what s/he is thinking and thinking about what another person is thinking. It goes
beyond empathy and mindfulness because it integrates the practice of empathising with yourself into the process. The process of mentalisation contributes to a person’s sense of agency, flexibility, positiveness, humour and connectedness with others. Mentalisation is developed through experiencing positive relationships and is the basis for positive relationships. It also contributes to the development of a person’s capacity for resilience. Furthermore, the literature suggests the presence of an emotionally safe environment impacts on a person’s capacity to mentalise.

This prior work suggests that the capacity to mentalise for teachers, parents and children is influenced by their relationship experiences and subsequent neurological development, their attachment experiences and their capacity to consider the mind of another. Twemlow et al. (2005) and Fonagy et al. (2009) saw the possible contribution of this theory within schools thus leading the way to introducing the notion of mentalisation into the education setting.

2.3 Mentalisation in Education

Within the field of education, literature that specifically focuses on mentalisation and the teacher-student relationship is sparse. Twemlow and Fonagy have undertaken the majority of work in this field. Twemlow et al. (2005) developed Creating A Peaceful School Learning Environment (CAPSLE), a mentalisation-based intervention for schools that applies mentalisation concepts to address the complex social structures underlying bullying and interpersonal violence in schools. This intervention, which focuses on relationship systems within schools, identifies bullying as a triadic structure of victim, victimiser and bystander. This structure, suggest Twemlow et al. (2005), acknowledges that all members of the school community are capable of filling each of
the roles within their various complex relationship networks, thus creating potential for power imbalance. This understanding of the nature of bullying is coupled with an understanding of the role of mentalisation in creating the mindset necessary for addressing power imbalances within school environments.

Approaches based on the theory of CAPSLE have been developed and implemented in other parts of the United States and Hungary. Within Australia the development of the Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment (CASSE) approach has seen the implementation of a mentalisation-based intervention being trialled in a small number of schools. After an initial trial in 2010, CASSE commenced a three-year pilot in 10 schools across Victoria. To date there is no published evaluation on this pilot.

There is also a large body of work on the relevance of attachment theory to education and the notion of an emotionally safe and supportive environment. Having previously identified the contribution of these within the development and practice of a person’s capacity to mentalise, it is appropriate for each to be examined.

2.3.1 Attachment theory and the teacher-student relationship.
Tobell and O Donnell (2011) identify the breadth of literature regarding various models of teacher-student relationship. In the mid 1920s Vygotsky formulated a theory of Zone of Proximal Development that identified the teacher as part of the social milieu in which a child learns (Ivic, 1994). Alderman and Green (2011) suggest the relationship requires the teachers to balance the four social powers of coercion, manipulation, expertness and likeability within their model of relationships in order to improve
student academic outcomes, behaviours, and connectedness. Jennings (2011) acknowledges the necessity for teachers to recognise the presence and role of emotions for the students in order to respond to their needs and create a sense of trust and respect.

Within the context of this study and the review of mentalisation within education, the teacher-student relationship will be explored through the framework of attachment theory. It will explore the notion of the teacher as a secure-base, the impact of the teacher’s attachment experience and the notion of teacher reflection.

In discussing the teacher as a secure base it is important to acknowledge the similarities and differences of this role to the role of caregiver and clinician.

Hrdy (2009) in her book Mothers and Others writes of the role of the ‘alloparent’ as a caregiver who does not replace the mother, yet has a strong caring connection with the child (see also Riley 2013). Youell (2006) and Salzberger-Wittenburg and Osbourne (1999) write that the teacher can be viewed as a continuation of the caregiver-child relationship. They describe the role of the teacher as creating, for the child, a sense of being cared for and being held in the mind of the teacher. For this caregiver role to be embraced and for the positive outcomes to be facilitated, the teacher needs to create a safe environment where the child feels their fears and anxieties are held by another (Youell, 2006). The teacher needs to “try and understand how the child feels, and be prepared to listen and see the child as an individual” (Salzberger-Wittenberg & Osbourne, 1999, p. 136). Youell (2006) describes the transition that occurs from the primary caregiver being the dominant container for the child, to the teacher taking on a proportion of that role in the eyes of the child. In contrast, Verschueren and Koomen
(2012) state that the characteristics of an attachment relationship include the presence of “… an exclusive and durable bond” (p. 206), which cannot be replicated by the teacher due to the nature of class structures and school routines. However, they do acknowledge that teachers “… do engage in caregiving behaviours” (p. 206).

In addition the teachers, unlike clinicians, are not exploring the mind of the student, but rather holding the mind of the child in their considerations. The role of the teacher is to be a secure and safe container as the child is exploring his/her mind through the mind of the teacher (Allen et al., 2003; Riley, 2011). Day (2004) draws a distinction between teachers and clinicians yet concedes that in the very act of connecting with students, which is integral to teaching, the teacher may engage in actions that could be therapeutic. French (1997) observes that, fundamentally, the role of the teacher is to maintain the safe and secure space needed for learning to take place. He sees that the parallel between teacher and clinician is their role in establishing and maintaining this space, which is vital for both learning and therapy to occur.

What can be concluded is that teachers have the potential to develop attachment-like relationships with students. Al-Yagon and Mikulincer argue that these relationships can provide care and support and a secure base that will facilitate the sense of security required for learning and relationship building (2006).

Prior to the last decade little was documented regarding the impact of the teacher’s attachment experience on teacher-student relationships (Kesner, 2000). Kesner (2000) states that the cornerstone of attachment theory is the understanding that an individual’s attachment history and subsequent internal working model influences the capacity “to
be an attachment figure for one’s own children” (p. 135). He was aware that the “… teachers’ attachment history with their own parents may be related to the quality of the relationships that form with students in the classroom” (p. 133).

Philip Riley’s (2011) Attachment theory and the teacher student relationship examines the impact of teacher attachment style on the establishment of teacher-student relationships. As a recent contribution within the Australian context this work provides important insight that builds our understanding of the contribution of a teacher’s attachment relationship on his/her teacher-student relationships.

From the framework of attachment theory, Riley argues that the teacher-student relationship is a dyadic relationship that is not uni-directional but reciprocal. It is a relationship where at times each party can be both carer and cared-for. He argues that the teacher needs to be needed by the student in order to maintain their professional identity and that without students there can be no teacher. He draws on a psychodynamic framework to assist teachers to understand the nature of relationships within the classroom. Riley posits that when teachers move into a classroom it is their ability to form and maintain relationships with students, sometimes in difficult circumstances, which impacts on their perceptions of success or failure as professionals. This ability is an important measure of teacher competence and has a significant bearing on teacher wellbeing.

Riley, along with other writers (Spilt et al., 2011), report that a teacher’s attachment experience is a pivotal factor in why he or she enters teaching. Split et al, (2011) write
… teachers have a basic need for relatedness with their students and they internalize interpersonal experiences with students into mental representational model (i.e., internal working models) that contain set beliefs and feelings regarding the self, the student and the self-student relationship on different levels of generalization (p. 458).

Pivotal to Riley’s understanding of attachment theory within teacher-student relationships is this concept of the inner working model. The inner working model, developed through primary relationships, is the lens through which an individual interprets and experiences subsequent relationships. This model is usually developed by the age of three, and acts as a protective function providing a filter for subsequent experiences through acting as a measure of what is acceptable and what is a threat. Al–Yargon and Mikulincer (2006) write that “every meaningful interaction with significant others throughout life may affect the individual’s beliefs about others’ availability and supportiveness” (p. 11) and contribute to the inner working model (see also Kesner, 2000).

The inner working model of both the teacher and the students plays a crucial role in the interaction within the teacher-student relationship. The capacity to understand that one’s inner working model is both different from and separate to the other’s inner working model allows the child to be able to negotiate shared goals with various attachment figures including teachers. As both the inner working models of the teacher and student interact there is a negotiating that occurs between the parties as they seek to align their working models. Within a secure relationship this process may cause some anxiety but ultimately it becomes a positive encounter. Where the relationship is unable to manage the anxiety, the process of seeking to align inner working models can result
in a manipulative or aggressive response as one seeks to change the working model of the other (Riley, 2011). This understanding of the presence and function of the inner working model can assist teachers to understand why what is effective for one student may not be effective for another student (Riley, 2011).

Riley asserts that like the general population, teachers are not immune to issues resulting from negative attachment experiences and their subsequent impact on later relationships. Riley states: “Teaching is traditionally assumed to be rational and logical” (p. 41) and “… that teachers as rational professionals, deal with students, including the aggressive and irrational ones, efficaciously and effectively, at nearly all times given the circumstances, training and experience” (p. 39). This observation is also echoed in the work of Jennings and Greenburg (2008) and Allen et al. (2008). Allen et al. write: “the difference to the presence of mentalisation within schools as compared to clinics is that we assume in school that teachers and students possess “the basic human capacity” of effective mind reading, whereas clinicians are dealing with those with impaired capacity” (p. 14).

In order to gain further understanding of the impact of a teacher’s attachment experience, Riley (2011) hypothesised that the outcomes of a positive attachment experience are crucial factors within subsequent relationships. Using the Experience of Close Relationships questionnaire developed by Brennan, Clarke and Shaver (1998) as a self-report measure of attachment, Riley found that 100% of his sample of 307 teachers fell into the category of insecure attachment. He acknowledges that this is counter to the generally accepted data that places 30-40% of the population as insecurely attached. Riley (2011) reports
The results reported provide two strong indications. The first indicator was that teachers are not a homogeneous population, and the second was that they are certainly not representative of the population as a whole, at least in attachment terms. Teachers are a unique subset of the population and this has many implications for future research into those who make up the profession (p. 62).

Riley argues that it could be expected that teachers who understand the mechanisms involved in attachment theory would be able to predict student behaviour more accurately and therefore would be more able to manage classes. To investigate this Riley used a brief form of psychoanalysis titled *Contextual Insight-Navigated Discussion* (CIND) with a number of teachers. This intervention comprised a series of six one-to-one interviews, “Starting with a full description of the present (context, environment, career), moving to the past (developmental history, work history) and finally to the future …(setting and striving towards realistic goals)” (p. 67).

The impact of this intervention was measured through data gathered from teacher self-report and reports from the participant’s supervisor. Riley (2011) concluded that: “In all cases the success of the model has been demonstrated anecdotally” (p. 92). Reports from five of the participants who had completed the intervention five years earlier indicated that they are continued to “…sustain less aggressive practices”, and were less flustered by common issues associated with the classroom and school organisation, and approach difficult interpersonal relationships within the school appropriately and calmly (p. 92).
Riley concludes that the attachment experience contributes to a teacher’s establishment of an inner working model through which “…the teacher’s previous experiences, through repeated interactions with her teachers, form the scaffold for her responses to students” (p. 40). This research presents us with an appreciation of the complex process of relationship experiences that impact on teachers’ relationship with their students. He concludes that teachers who understand their own processes, including personal triggers for security and insecurity, are even better equipped, but that this can only be achieved through deep reflection on the significant events of one’s personal life in relation to the professional one.

The significant contribution to education of the concept of teacher reflection is recognised by Riley and is relevant to our discussion of mentalisation because teacher reflection also focuses on the importance of an understanding of self. In the 1950s there was recognition that a teacher’s understanding of self directly contributed to student wellbeing outcomes (Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999; Tusin, 1999). Zeichner and Liston (1996) reviewed the history of teacher reflective practices, referencing the work of Dewey and Schon as influential contributors to the development of the concept of teacher reflection. Zeichner and Liston (1996) cite Dewey, who in the 1930s defined …reflective action as that which involves active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of reasons that support it and the further consequences to which it leads … it is a holistic way of meeting and responding, a way of being a teacher (p. 9).

The work of Schon in the 1980s has provided an influential model of teacher reflection within education. Schon’s model incorporated reflection-on-action; that is “… planning and thinking about our lesson and after instruction” (p. 14) and reflection-in-action,
which occurs while the teaching is taking place. This model of reflection aims to create different ways of being, or to improve practice (Harvard & Phil, 1994; Zeichner, 1994).

There are a number of writers who have written on the “being” of the teacher as raised by Dewey or the “teacher’s soul” (Day, 2004; Nodding, 2001; Palmer, 1998; Rose, 1989; Salzberger-Wittenberg & Osbourne, 1999). These scholars write of passion, caring, identity, and the self within teachers. For these writers deep reflection is seen in terms of a focus on the self as an integrated whole within the practice of teaching. It moves beyond the understanding of reflection in terms of a synthesis of theory and experience influencing practice. They speak more of the transformative experience within as the teacher embraces the professional within the personal (Day, 2004). A brief review of these concepts will provide a relevant insight into the contribution of teacher reflection within the teacher-student relationship.

Day (2004) and Salzberger-Wittenberg and Osbourne (1999) write extensively about the need for teachers to engage their capacity to think about themselves, and to be attuned to their own feelings as they consider the feelings of the child. This, they argue, is essential to responding creatively to the child’s individual needs. The writers posit that through self-reflection a teacher begins to recognise emotions within themselves that may also be present in the students. This greater awareness enhances the teacher’s capacity to more accurately empathise with the student and to observe warning signs of distress in the child. Rather than simply observing what is happening for the student this approach moves the teacher to consider his or her place or contribution within the situation. Willshire (1999) adds that the teacher enters into an “…immersion into another’s reality while observing their own thoughts and feelings” (p. 160).
Parker Palmer (1983) suggests that teacher reflection involves an integration of the teacher’s life. This he argues is a process of drawing together the personal and professional being with the emotional, intellectual and spiritual realm, as the teacher explores his/her inner landscape. Palmer writes:

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadow of my unexamined life- and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject- not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning (p. 3).

Palmer argues that an authentic teacher must have self-knowledge that comes from within and that this will, in turn, positively impact on students. He is interested in asking: “who is the self that teaches?” (p. 4). For Palmer the capacity for connectedness is a characteristic of good teaching. He says: the teachers “… are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can weave a world for themselves” (p. 11). Palmer highlights the need for teachers to explore their identity and integrity as a pivotal component within the establishment of positive relationships, and argues that only then can teaching occur and relationships have depth.

Having examined attachment relationships, teacher self reflection and the inner working model within the education setting, we will now continue our review of the educational literature. This includes an examination of the role of, and current threats to, the provision of an emotionally safe and supportive environment.
2.3.2 Threats to the creation of schools as emotionally safe and supportive environments.

The experiencing of an emotionally safe and supportive environment has been identified as an essential factor in facilitating the capacity to mentalise. The current education environment for teachers has been identified by some writers as contributing to an increase in teacher anxiety resulting in a decrease in their (the teachers’) capacity to attain the secure base needed for creative thought. Day (2004) writes “The space formally available for spontaneity, creativity and attending to unanticipated learning needs of children and young people have contracted as teachers struggle to attain government targets and achievement and fulfil associated bureaucratic demands” (p. 14). He argues that this culture of performance heightens the emotional states of teachers leading to a reduction in their capacity to learn, make decisions and build and maintain positive relationships.

Jennings and Greenburg (2008) identify the internal and external factors that impact on the social and emotional competence of teachers. They write, “These factors include co-teacher support, principal and district leadership, school climate and norms, school district values and in-service opportunities, community culture, and local and federal education policy and demands” (p. 498) which contribute to the milieu of the education setting. These factors have also been identified as contributing to a diminished sense of emotional safety.

Apple (2004) suggests that the concept of performativity developed by the philosopher Lyotard, provides a helpful framework to consider the current educational climate. Lyotard (1984) argued that within the postmodern society the drive for measures and
outcomes contributes to a sense of “terror” within individuals who want to challenge or consider alternative responses from those deemed appropriate.

James Avis (2005) argues that a school culture that is so focussed and anxious to fulfil set measures and targets, through the influence of performativity, has its creativity stifled. At the classroom level teachers feel like their performance is being measured through the performance of their students. This is illustrated through the use of terms such as “high performing teachers”, and even the recent push to equate teachers’ pay with education outcomes (Comber & Nixon, 2009; Gordon, 2011). It is suggested that the anxiety found within the current culture of education is driving a change in the way teachers are approaching education and their longevity in the field. Riley (2011, 2013) challenges schools to acknowledge and address the stress factors as he claims they diminish the establishment of a secure base, and ultimately contribute to teachers feeling unable to respond positively and sustainably to the stressors of the teaching situation, causing them to leave the profession.

Day (2004), Riley (2011) and Palmer (1983) have written on the impact of the performance driven culture on the emotional life of teachers. Riley (2011) states there has been a focus on curriculum and teaching conditions; however, until recently there has been little focus of research on the emotional needs of the teacher. Parker Palmer (1983) suggests that schools need to support teachers if they expect the students to be supported. Such support cannot be provided within a school environment that is hostile towards issues of the self and that “seeks safety in the technical, the distant, and the abstract” (p. 12). Riley (2011) pointedly states: “To ignore or deny teacher’s emotions
is to ignore or deny their humanity and therefore their authentic selves in the classroom context” (p. 41).

Day (2004) acknowledges that reforms need to address the teachers’ “…primary need for self fulfilment, job satisfaction, and being valued”, vital elements which generates for them the “time and space to allow the creation, recreation and sustaining of the passion for teaching that enables them to teach at their best” (p. 3). Leithwood and Beatty (2008) seek to “…clarify how those providing leadership in schools can help nurture and maintain positive emotions among individual teachers and a positive climate across the whole school” (p. 6). Palmer (1998) identifies the institutional and cultural features that can add to a feeling of despair and impede change in schools namely, an overtly business focus, overcrowded classrooms and curriculum, and assessment regimes. He argues if an organisation has an open-minded leader, there will be a willingness and capacity to embrace the notion of change and the upheaval that goes along with the uncertainty of change.

2.4 Conclusion

This literature review provides the necessary context to more fully understand the factors impacting on teacher-student relationships. It has examined the concept of mentalisation by reviewing its definition, characteristics and its origin. It has also provided an understanding of the influence of attachment theory and the pre-condition of an emotionally safe and supportive environment in the development of teacher-student relationships.
Having set the context of the study, the following chapter will present the research methodology employed to identify the teachers' perceptions of factors that impact on teacher-student relationships.
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Type of Study

The previous chapter presented a literature review of the theoretical context of the study. This chapter discusses the methodology employed to gather teachers’ experiences.

The aim of the research investigation was to hear participants’ perceptions of the factors that impact on teacher-student relationships. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What factors do teachers identify as impacting on their capacity to establish and maintain positive teacher-student relationships?

2. What can the theory of mentalisation contribute to the examination and interpretation of these factors?

The researcher was interested in understanding the teachers’ experiences of teacher-student relationships and to identify and analyse influencing factors through the lens of mentalisation in order to inform future action and research in the area of teacher-student relationships.

A qualitative rather than a quantitative methodology was chosen for this research. Dowling and Brown (2010) write: “Qualitative approaches are often associated with research that is carried out in the interpretive frame in which the concern is with the production of meaning” (p. 89), while quantitative methodology is “…concerned with the search for facts” (p. 89). For this study a qualitative research methodology was
chosen for its capacity to allow an exploration of the complexities of the concept of teacher-student relationships within the education setting (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington, & Okely, 2006). The choice of this methodology allowed the researcher to seek, uncover and examine the experience of teacher-student relationships from the teacher perspective.

The investigation used a phenomenological research design with its methodologically careful and thorough approach to capturing and describing how participants experience teacher-student relationships. Kervin et al. (2006) write this design approach “…entails understanding the viewpoint of the insiders within a particular social setting” (p. 67). The researcher sought to understand how the participants made sense of the notion of teacher-student relationships, and how this experience is transformed “…into consciousness both individually and as a shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

3.2 Participants

A purposeful selection of participants for this investigation was crucial to gaining meaningful information (Kervin et al., 2006). A model of purposive or theoretical sampling (Kervin et al., 2006; Patton, 2002) was used when selecting participants. The key element in the selection was that participants could “tell the researcher what they observe, think and feel” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 106) (see also Cresswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) regarding their experiences of teacher-student relationships.
3.2.1 Recruitment.

The researcher approached six primary schools from within her professional network, as there was an established relationship of trust through the researcher’s work in the area of wellbeing. After initial contact with the school principals to inform them of the scope of the research investigation and to gain permission to engage their school, a time was made for the researcher to address all the staff and distribute an ‘Expression of Interest’ document (see Appendix C). This document contained introductory information, an outline of the scope of the research, a statement regarding teacher-student relationships and researcher contact details. The teachers were invited to contact the researcher if they identified with the statement on teacher-student relationships and were interested in being part of the study.

The researcher presented to approximately 120 staff members across six schools. Of the six schools initially approached the final group of participants were drawn from one Independent and three Government schools. Eight teachers from four school settings who responded to the Expression of Interest became participants in the research. The participants included six females and two males with a range of teaching experience from 3 to 42 years (see Table 1). Some of the participants had entered the teaching profession via university directly from school, while others had previously worked outside education. The participants were all primary classroom teachers and held a variety of roles within their schools.
Table 1. Participants in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pathway to Teaching</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>2012 Teaching Roles</th>
<th>2013 Teaching Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brad</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Middle Years Learning Coach</td>
<td>ELearning Coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cath</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Learning Advisor</td>
<td>Year 1 classroom teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kylie</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Work-university</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5/6 teacher</td>
<td>Team leader for Senior school 4/5 teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Prep coordinator and team leader</td>
<td>Prep coordinator and team leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Work-university</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Maternity leave</td>
<td>Junior school/ part time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>University-work</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Level 4 coordinator Teaching and Learning coordinator</td>
<td>Teaching and Learning Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>3/4 level coordinator</td>
<td>Senior Literacy and Numeracy support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Work university</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Prep teacher and prep team leader</td>
<td>Leading teacher 5/6 and Vice principal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: Pseudonyms have been used to maintain participant confidentiality)

Patton (2002) claims there are no rules regarding the sample size within qualitative inquiry; however, he does emphasise the need for the sample size or unit of analysis to support the study purpose through information rich cases. The sample size for this investigation was eight: a number indicated by other writers as providing a purposeful sampling size (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The use of the Expression of Interest
encouraged information rich cases and this number also recognised the balance between practicalities of data collection and analysis while allowing for initial themes and patterns to be identified (Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2002). It also provided a functional size for a focus group, one of the intended data collection methods (Del Rio-Roberts, 2011; King & Horrocks, 2010; Krueger, 1994).

3.3 Ethics

Ethics approval to conduct the research was gained through the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) along with approval to carry out research in the State primary schools from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and from the principals at the two Independent Schools. Throughout the research project all processes, procedures and protocols met the standards required by HREC. This included written documents such as Plain Language Statements and Consent Letters and confidentiality protocols, and processes of data storage and risk management.

3.4 Data Collection

The researcher collected data on the participants’ perceptions of factors impacting on their relationships with students through one-to-one semi structured interviews and a focus group. A researcher journal was also used. Participants were asked to attend a 60-minute one-to-one interview and also a 60-minute focus group comprising all participants. The first research question provided the framework on which the questions used in the interviews and focus group were developed. The interviews and focus group were held outside of school hours. All interviews and the focus group were conducted
in a location that provided privacy and the capacity to audiotape. The time and date of the interviews and focus group were negotiated to suit the participants.

3.4.1 Interviews.
Rabionet (2011) writes that the aim of the semi-structured interviews is to hear the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon being studied. To achieve this the interview used open-ended questions. This provided flexibility within the interview to maintain a focus on teacher-student relationships while responding to the individual thoughts of the participant. (King & Horrocks, 2010; Patton, 2002). The interview schedule (see Appendix D) included questions to elicit participant background, experience and behaviour (Q.1-3, 4a, 5a), opinion and values (Q4b, 5b, 6-10, Additional), and sensory responses (Q2, 3) (Patton, 2002). The researcher structured the interview questions in language, which conveyed the clearest meaning, using wording accessible and familiar to all participants (Patton, 2002; Searle, 1999). Prompting was employed to ensure clarity and depth in the responses.

3.4.2 Focus group.
The focus group was designed to engage the collective creative dynamic found within a group in the exploration of the research question (Colucci, 2007; Patton; 2002). A set of questions was developed based on the themes emerging from analysis of the interview data (see Appendix E). The structure and framework of the focus group was designed to ensure it remained on task while allowing room for “individual perspective and experience to emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 343).
The focus group was conducted on a Sunday morning at the school of one of the participants. All eight participants agreed to attend; however, one was unavailable due to illness. After introductory comments and a review of protocols and procedures, discussion was divided into three sections: approaches to teacher-student relationships; factors identified as hindering and facilitating teacher-student relationships; and an opportunity for closing comments.

3.4.3 Researcher journal.

During the course of the investigation a researcher journal was kept to allow time and space for the researcher to note observations, feelings and intuitive responses to all areas of the study (Patton, 2002). The researcher journal included three aspects:

1. During the course of the interview and focus group repeated words and concepts were noted. These served as prompts for the researcher to clarify or follow up threads of the conversation with participants. These notes were also used after the interview and focus group during data analysis.

2. At the conclusion of each interview and focus group the researcher wrote a short paragraph in order to record the initial responses of the participants and to capture the general tenor of the interaction between participant, researcher and the questions asked.

3. The researcher journal was also used to record initial interpretations of the data that may have some potential relevance.
3.5 Rigour and Trustworthiness

There are various methods to ensure the validity, integrity and trustworthiness of the data gathering, analysis and findings of qualitative research (Cresswell, 2007; Searle, 1999). For this research the methods included the establishment of credibility and trustworthiness through the researcher’s lengthy engagement in the education sector, the use of audit trails to track data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993) and triangulation (Patton 2002).

3.5.1 Credibility and trust.

Erlandson et al. (1993) identified trust and rapport between the researcher and participants as a characteristic positively impacting the validity of data. It was hoped that the researcher’s involvement in education for over 25 years, including extensive experience of the day-to-day workings of schools and an appreciation of teachers’ roles and work expectations, would assist in establishing credibility with participants.

Specific elements were included in the research design to maximise the validity and integrity of the data gathered:

1. During the introduction to the interview and the focus group, the participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that the researcher was interested in their experiences and perceptions.
2. The researcher listened for and encouraged participants to provide specific examples to illustrate opinions or beliefs.
3. The researcher followed the interview schedule with each participant to ensure that interviews remained focussed on key issues while providing participants flexibility in their responses.

3.5.2 Audit trail.

To maximise the validity of data gathering and analysis, the interviews and the focus group were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. An audit trail code was devised to record the origin of the data through numbering each question and line of the interview and the focus group (see Appendix F for a sample of the audit trail developed for the interview and focus group).

The researcher found that in a few instances minor grammatical changes were required in the text in order to ensure clarity while maintaining the original intent of the speaker. As has been highlighted by King and Horrocks (2010) “… we would accept that it is sometimes appropriate to carry out minor tidying up in order to aid comprehension” (p. 149) however this is to be done with great care not to change or distort the meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the example below, the use of the words ‘you know’ by the participant were used as an idiom rather than to indicate the act of singling out particular children of whom she had some knowledge.

Verbatim Transcript

_Um...I think that again there are lots of positive talk and praise and encouragement and, um, not singling children out you know..._ (Sue Interview)

Amended Transcript
Um...I think that again there are lots of positive talk and praise and encouragement and, um, not singling children out. (Sue Interview)

3.5.3 Triangulation

Triangulation was gained through using multiple data sources: interviews, focus group and researcher journal. The focus group provided an occasion for the themes gathered from the one-to-one interviews to be clarified and reviewed. It also provided a chance to explore apparent exceptions and variations identified in the one-to-one interviews and the researcher journal. This allowed potential themes or inconsistencies to be either dismissed by the group or act to stimulate new discussion providing an opportunity for participants to correct prior contributions (Patton, 2002).

3.6 Data Analysis

The initial approach to data analysis, which addresses the first research question, was inductive analysis, a form of thematic analysis where “Findings are drawn out from the data through the analyst’s interaction with the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 452). It required the researcher to draw codes from within the data rather than trying to have them fit a particular theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of thematic analysis focused on the participants’ lived experience of the phenomena being studied (King & Horrocks, 2010). This inductive approach ensured that the factors the teachers perceived as impacting on their capacity to establish and maintain teacher-student relationships were identified. This was followed by deductive analysis addressing the second research question, where the theory of mentalisation was employed as the lens to examine the factors generated from the inductive analysis.
Patton (2002) suggests

The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data. This involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal (p. 432).

In response to the challenge of qualitative data analysis identified by Patton, the researcher sifted through the data in order to create the necessary framework needed to communicate meaning from the gathered raw information. The framework for this data analysis was based on the identification of codes, sub-themes and themes. This framework was established as a result of working with the data at various levels. It began within the interview itself. The process of listening in the interview and then transcribing provided the researcher with a deeper knowledge and understanding of the responses (Patton, 2002). It was a process focused on analysing the data gathered from individuals against the data set as a whole, with movement backwards and forwards to develop the final set of codes, sub-themes and themes.

3.6.1 Codes, sub-themes and themes

The researcher had originally noted in the researcher journal possible codes that emerged through the interview process, both during the interview or directly afterwards. When the interviews were transcribed, the researcher began a formal and systematic process of noting and labelling additional codes. As more interviews were coded, there was evidence of repeated codes across the interviews. Codes were refined and others were added as the researcher worked with the data. When all data was coded, the codes were examined for internal patterns and grouped together under descriptive titles. This
method of categorising and analysing the data identified patterns within the codes (King & Horrocks, 2010; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

The researcher moved from identifying the codes to grouping codes together into sub-themes. This step required the researcher to move from describing or responding to the data to interpreting the data. Analysis of the focus group data provided the opportunity to review codes and sub-themes developed by the researcher from the analysis of the one-to-one interview data. This provided an opportunity to establish new codes and gain a deeper understanding of the existing ones.

The themes provided the final layer of the framework for the analysis of the data (King & Horrocks, 2010), and captured “… something important about the data in relation to the research question…” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). The themes were established to draw together the data within the codes and sub-themes, providing overarching categories focused on identifying the factors participants perceive as impacting on teacher-student relationships.

The findings and discussion gathered through this methodological framework will now be presented.
Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This study was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors do teachers identify as impacting on their capacity to establish and maintain teacher-student relationships?

2. What can the theory of mentalisation contribute to the examination and interpretation of these factors?

This chapter moves from identifying the factors perceived by the participants as impacting on teacher-student relationships to examining and interpreting these factors through the lens of mentalisation.

It is important to note that this chapter sees the introduction of the term ‘healthy teacher-student relationship’ (see definition of terms on page 10). This term is used to reflect the model of relationship that the participants believed was present, or that they aimed to develop, with students.

4.2 Identifying Factors

Employing thematic data analysis the three themes ‘Teacher’, ‘Other’ and ‘Environment’ were identified (see Figure 3). Each of these themes contains subthemes and codes that will now be presented.
4.2.1 Teacher.

The theme ‘Teacher’ includes factors identified by participants related to the person of the teacher. It includes their prior relationship experiences and the values, hopes and beliefs that the participants perceive they bring to the teacher-student relationship. It contains the sub-themes of ‘Origin of relationship approaches’ and ‘Approach to teacher-student relationships’.
The first sub-theme, ‘Origin of relationship approaches’, includes the data related to the origin, influences and experiences that have informed the development of the participants’ approach to teacher-student relationships. The second sub-theme, ‘Approach to teacher-student relationship’, focuses on how this approach was operationalised within participants’ practice.

### 4.2.1.1 Origin of relationship approaches.

The sub-theme ‘Origin of relationship approaches’ draws data from the additional question in the one-to-one interviews (see Appendix D): “Where do you think your approach to teacher-student relationships stems from?” This question focused on gaining the perceptions of participants about what has shaped, informed or contributed to their approach to teacher-student relationships. The codes that emerged from an analysis of the data included ‘prior relationship experiences’, ‘inherent characteristics’ and ‘pre-service training’ as factors contributing to the participants’ approach to building relationships with students.

**Prior relationship experiences**

The participants identified four aspects of their prior relationship experiences that impacted on their approach to building teacher-student relationships: family, personal experience as a student and relationship with work colleagues.

Six of the eight participants believed their approach to building teacher-student relationships was influenced by their relationship experiences, both positive and negative, in their family of origin. Participants were able to identify the influence of positive experiences (2 participants), and negative experiences (2 participants). One
participant stated that her experience had been both positive and negative, while another acknowledged the influence of the family experience, but did not indicate if this was positive or negative. One participant stated that their approach to relationships did not stem from her experience of family. The following quotes provide an indication of the participants’ responses.

Positive Experience of Family of Origin

*I suppose it stems from my family. Because I am one of six and we are quite an open family and we moved out from Ireland, and there are just the six of us and so we have this dynamic where we are each our own person, aware of who we are as a person, we give each other own space and when we gather together we are a united front when we come together. And so going through that is a core element.* (Brad Interview)

Negative Experience of Family of Origin

*But for me it was really important that I was, as a child, just listened to and acknowledged and that people expressed empathy. I had very little of that. I can’t remember it at school, it may have happened, I can’t remember, but I certainly didn’t get it at home so that would be a fairly strong driving force for me that would drive my teaching practice.* (Kylie Interview)

Positive and Negative Experience of Family of Origin

*...the positive construct of that and the negative construct of that which I have probably developed myself in childhood through relationships with family...* (Kim Interview)

*...and probably the way I was brought up as a child.* (Rita Interview)

Participants also identified their educational experience, including recollections of specific teachers, as influencing their approach to relationships with their students (Brad, Cath, Sue Interviews). Again, both positive and negative experiences were presented. The following quotes are representative of the responses.
Positive Education Experience

*Then going through school I had some great teachers...These teachers really stand out in my mind because they went above and beyond and really knew me.* (Brad Interview)

Negative Education Experience

*So I didn’t feel that any of my teachers knew who I was at all. I didn’t think they disliked me, I just thought that they didn’t, they didn’t... I was of no account.* (Barb Interview)

Four of the eight participants spoke of their teaching experience and interaction with colleagues as influencing their approach to relationships with their students (Sue, Mary, Barb, Alex Interview). These participants indicated that teaching colleagues had provided positive and negative role models, and that the positive models were a source of support and a resource for them as they developed their teacher-student relationships.

Influence of Colleagues

*I learnt so much watching how they went about it [teacher-student relationships]...And I just slowly incorporated lots of different strategies from people I had seen...Doing all that casual work helps too; in seeing what you don’t like; what doesn’t work.* (Sue Interview)

One participant expressed that it was through an experience of a lack of positive relationships in a workplace that lead her to teaching where she was seeking a place of work that would give her a sense of community (Mary Focus Group).

**Inherent characteristics**

When referring to the origin of approaches to teacher-student relationships, participants used terms such as it being *natural, within a person’s nature* and *coming from within*. These have been termed inherent characteristics within this study. Two participants
expressed a belief that there were inherent characteristics within their approach to teacher-student relationships. One participant used phrases such as *It's just the way I am...It is something within us...that we naturally know how to do...it ultimately comes from within.* (Barb Interview)

There appeared to be some ambiguity in the discussion of these inherent characteristics with one participant expressing *I have always loved kids...I just always had that nature,* but later appearing to contradict herself by saying; *I think it [building teacher-student relationships] was something that didn’t come naturally to me* (Sue interview).

This belief in the presence of inherent characteristics within the approach to teacher-student relationship was also expressed when participants were discussing the value of the teacher-student relationship.

In the focus group participants expressed the view that not all their colleagues valued the teacher-student relationship. One participant mentioned that this group of colleagues would be characterised as *disinterested* (Rita Focus Group), *disengaged* (Brad Focus Group), or as teachers who *hate kids* (Brad Focus Group). The following extract from the focus group provides an example of the participants’ views on the contribution of inherent characteristics to a teacher’s approach to relationships.

*Barb:* *It’s a bit sad that we actually have teachers that we have to do these things [focus on building positive teacher student relationships] for, it should be natural...It would be nice if all teachers who come into the profession really wanted to form relationships with children and did it, wouldn’t it.*

*Cath:* *But it is something that some people are just not mindful of at all.*
Participants made a distinction between the apparent ease with which some teachers develop student relationships, while others seem to lack this natural capacity. The following quotes provide examples of the participants’ view that the ability to build relationships involves inherent characteristics:

... working with a young graduate this year (two years out) has shown me that it is just innate. She’s just ‘got it’... Yep, just a natural at it... I think that is something that didn’t come terribly naturally to me... I thought AF would be really needy and needing me to support them in building relationships and the way you go about things but I didn’t need to she is just a natural. (Sue Interview)

And I know you can teach people, you can teach people some things, some people you can work with them til you are blue in the face and they are never going to be a teacher. (Barb Interview)

Pre-service training

Pre-service training was believed to have influenced the origin of the participants’ approach to teacher-student relationships. Three participants identified the influence of learning and theory within their approach to relationships (Focus Group). Each of these participants had completed study in Early Childhood. Participants who had not completed Early Childhood studies made no mention of the impact of their pre-service training on the formation of teacher-student relationships.

The following comment from one participant in the focus group summarises the codes presented within the sub-theme of ‘Origin of relationship approaches’. It illustrates the contribution of prior relationship experiences, inherent characteristics and pre-service training in the formation of teacher-students relationships. It also recognises the
participants’ perceptions of the role not only of their prior relationship experiences, but also suggests the role of a process of reflection on those experiences as they build their approach to teacher-student relationships.

_I think it goes back to my notion of [what] relationship looks like or feel like and the positive construct of that and the negative construct of that which I have probably developed myself in childhood through relationships with family and family, friends and probably some of my teachers. I guess I would have seen the construct of a relationship that I didn’t think was really all that positive and the construct of a relationship that I felt were really really beneficial in one’s life. So I guess that is where it has stemmed from. I guess my knowledge of teacher child relationship in terms of theory is probably developed more through uni and then professional development or reading I have done from that, and just those lived experiences._ (Cath Interview)

4.2.1.2 Approach to teacher-student relationships.

The second sub-theme within the theme of ‘Teacher’ identified the participants’ understanding of how they approached developing teacher-student relationships. This sub-theme draws together data on operationalising the teacher-student relationship and includes the impact of valuing the teacher-student relationship, characteristics of the classroom culture and the participants’ views on time.

The recruitment process for this research required participants to volunteer their time outside of school hours to share their experiences of teacher-student relationships. In light of this apparently altruistic act it is not surprising that all participants expressed their belief in the positive contribution of teacher-student relationships on their teaching practice and student outcomes. Participants were not directly asked to share their understanding of the value of the teacher-student relationships however, four
participants acknowledged its contribution in delivering better learning outcomes (Brad, Cath, Rita, Alex). The following extract represents the responses.

...without the positive relationship, without that really kind of deep connect, I think there is a lot of great learning, whether that is social or emotional what ever it is, that can be missed. Once you have had that deep connect it allows for a more open dialogue, it’s deeper learning, it’s knowing each other, its knowing when to get out of their way, when to meddle with them, knowing when to press when is it an achievement. (Brad Interview)

All participants were able to share how they intentionally developed a teacher-student relationship and afforded it a priority within their teaching practice. Having established the participants’ belief in the value of the teacher-student relationship, an examination of the classroom culture they sought to create provides further insight into their approach to building relationships with their students.

The participants aspired to create a classroom culture that reflected the importance they placed on the teacher-student relationships. Their ideal classroom culture included the notions of respect, care, kindness, shared values, boundaries, mutuality and connection. Giving a priority to getting to know each student as an individual was evident within the responses of all participants. For example: “I want to know, really know these kids (Brad Interview), I am pretty keen to just listen” (Kylie Interview); Take a genuine interest (Mary Interview).

A critical factor in the creation of the classroom culture that prioritised the teacher-student relationship was the participants’ values and beliefs regarding time. Throughout the responses, there were frequent references to time and four patterns were identified:
the time necessary for relationships to develop, the negative impact of a lack of time, the allocation of time, and the discourse used in reference to time.

Time was seen as a necessary ingredient for developing relationships. Participants believed the teacher-student relationship benefitted from a prolonged interaction between the teacher and student.

...so that journey for a longer period of time allows you to really deepen the roots for the relationship. (Brad Interview)

However participants also expressed the opinion that, within this longer ‘journey’ short multiple interactions with the students also contributed to developing relationships. A combination of both of these elements was believed to positively impact on the teacher-student relationship and it was believed that when one of these elements was compromised there was a negative impact on teacher-student relationships. Participants believed factors such as school imposed time constraints influenced their capacity to respond to and engage with students.

I think (pressure on) time is a real hindrance to building that relationship when you are constantly telling the kids “love to but we are going to have to do that later because we’ve got to be out investigating by 20 past nine”...
(Alex Interview)

Participant responses also identified the manner in which participants chose to allocate time to maximise relationship building potential. Working in small groups, setting individual tasks, going to see students play sport and using time on yard duty or during recess were all identified as opportunities to use time for building relationships. The
following excerpt is representative of the perception of the allocation of time among the participants.

...I take the time to get to know them and their interests too. ...It's just those little things I suppose a lot of it is just time, just making that time to go around to each one of them as they are working and checking on them and monitor what they are up to and things. But I suppose being in a small group situations and having the time to actually spend and talk to them was so powerful ...and just having that time to be able to go out, help her, sit down and talk to her and listen...It was just so powerful. It's time, its really time...I think I have persevered with him and tried to create the opportunity ...made myself available for him...work in a small group or individually with them through out the day each day. So making that time... (Sue Interviews)

Another pattern that emerged within the code of time was the discourse about time. Participants used the terms ‘spending time’, ‘making time’ and ‘taking time’. The main focus from the participants was on spending time and taking time rather than the need to make time. The observation from the researcher was that these participants were more focussed on the way they used the time available intentionally to strengthen teacher-student relationships, rather than making time in response to sensing a lack of time.

During the focus group a summary of the data on time was presented to participants. The researcher indicated that their perceived lack of urgency to make time contradicted the common perception portrayed in the media that a crowded curriculum and emphasis on assessment and benchmarks was taking time from teachers. The participants responded to this by reaffirming their focus on intentionally using time as opposed to being preoccupied with a lack of time or the necessity to make time. In the ensuing discussion participants shifted the conversation back to the use of time and introduced the notion of balance and the capacity for flexibility.
Balance was perceived in the context of a broad approach to learning that encompassed both wellbeing (including teacher-student relationships) and curriculum. The following quote from one participant in the focus group reflects the comments of the group regarding balance:

*I don’t see why welfare, relationships and curriculum are spoken of separately. To me you are teaching curriculum you are developing relationships and as you are developing relationships you are teaching curriculum. They are totally intertwined and you do both all the time. And I know what you are saying it is a balancing act.*

(Mary Focus Group)

The capacity for flexibility was believed to be a necessary ingredient in maintaining the balance between the time spent building relationships with the students and fulfilling organisational, structural and learning requirements. The following is illustrative of the flow of conversation within the focus group:

*I think if you have that flexibility that is great, you can deal with the incidentals along the way and if you want to have a focus time on developing relationships in addition to what happens always and it is an ongoing part of what you do that is great.* (Cath Focus Group)

Prior to concluding the presentation of findings within the theme ‘Teacher’ is important to note a connection between ‘Prior relationship experience’ and the sub-theme ‘Approach to teacher-student relationships’ (see Figure 3). Similarities became apparent between the language used in the participants’ description of their prior relationship experiences (particularly within their family and schooling) and their description of how they approached developing teacher-student relationships. For five of the eight participants there were strong similarities between the language used or
values expressed when describing their prior relationship experience and their subsequent approach to developing teacher-student relationships. Table 2 provides an example of this association.

**Table 2. Language used to describe prior school and family relationship experience and current approach to teacher-student relationships.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Barb</strong></th>
<th><strong>Primary School</strong></th>
<th><strong>Brad</strong></th>
<th><strong>Schooling</strong></th>
<th><strong>Kylie</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary School</strong></td>
<td>I felt nurtured and cossetted and loved and looked after and people wanted me to learn. (Interview)</td>
<td>…I was of no account …[The teachers] didn’t really show any interest in you as a person. (Interview)</td>
<td>[I come from an] open family… so we have this dynamic where we are each our own person, aware of who we are as a person, we give each other own space (interview)</td>
<td>…they [the teachers] … really knew me. (Interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>…we want to be teachers, because we want to nurture children and see them learn and grow…thing I am always telling them, [the student] that I am trying help them learn. (Interview)</strong></td>
<td>I think that the main thing that I do is to get to know, to acknowledge each individual and get them to know them as an individual. (Interview)</td>
<td>We have an open relationship…I think the ability to look at your own self, being aware of how you are in the space. (Interview)</td>
<td>I want to know, really know these kids. (Interview)</td>
<td>… as a child, just listened to and …I had very little of that. (Interview)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the participants reflected on the possibility that her own childhood experience had shaped the manner in which she approaches relationships with her students. For this participant, while there was not the mirroring of language, there was an acknowledgement of the influence of her own experience as a child on her interactions with students.

*I think my family situation was pretty tough when I was a kid so maybe I have built up some sort of need for that wanting to support and help others through that situations...I've been through a divorce situation as a kid and I know what it's like that mum and dad are struggling to work things out.*

(Sue Interview)

During the focus group the participants were presented with the initial observation of a possible connection between their prior relationship experiences and their current approach to teacher-student relationships. Five of the participants expressed that they had considered this connection and the remaining participants appeared unsurprised by the suggested link (Focus Group). Each the participant shared his/her own view on how his/her prior relationship experiences influenced their approach to teacher-student relationships.

The notion of the role of reflection in integrating prior relationship experience into the participants’ approach to interactions with students was introduced. The excerpt below illustrates the complex nature of the moment-by-moment interactions between teachers and students and highlights the presence of a feedback cycle incorporating prior relationship experience, self-reflection, inherent characteristics and pre-service training.
**Researcher:** ...So you are responding to both the positive and negative experiences that you have had as you create your own way of approaching kids?

**Cath:** I think self-reflection plays a really key role in that too...

**All:** Yes yes

**Cath:** ...when you are doing that self-reflection and you are considering the current scenario you are in um you become very eclectic in that that you are taking influences from research from recent from theory from who you are as a person, your values and beliefs and all those factors that play a part and feed into that also. I think that a lot of that happens during times when you are being reflective of your practice.

**Barb:** A lot of it comes on the run too... we sort of just had to go by instinct and try thing and if they didn’t work, try something else. And we did talk about it and we did think about it, but often you have to do things on the run, just do what your gut tells you

**All:** MMM yeah

**Rita:** And trial and error. This worked for this kid, but it didn’t work for that one.

**Brad:** It’s that feedback cycle. It might be you get 5 min [and] you think I might do that differently and the next time I might try it this way.

**Cath:** I was thinking that while that didn’t work so you are reflecting so next time if that happens again, I’ll try this approach. So when you are on the run you are innately acting because of who you are, the experience you have had, so that instinct is coming from somewhere

**All:** mmm, yeah, ... (Focus Group)

The participants shared their view on the contribution of their prior relationship experiences, inherent characteristics and pre-service training on the origin of their approach to teacher-students relationships. They expressed their belief in the role, not only of their prior relationship experiences, but also their reflective responses to those experiences as a contributing factor in building teacher-student relationships.
Participants expressed the importance of valuing the relationship and the subsequent contribution this made to their response to time and the creation of a positive classroom culture.

4.2.2 Other.

The theme ‘Other’ identifies the participants’ belief in the presence of the complex triadic relationship of teacher-student-parent as a factor impacting on teacher-student relationships. The findings within the sub-themes of ‘The students’ and ‘The parents’ will be presented separately while maintaining an understanding of the complex relationship that exists between each (see to Figure 2).

4.2.2.1 The students.

Primary to understanding the factor of the students was the participants’ perception of the reciprocal nature of the teacher-student relationship. Both the teacher and the student needed to participate and engage in the relationship. They expressed the belief that the student’s prior relationship experiences and individual attributes and the interactions in the school day (including peer relationships) were factors that impact on teacher-student relationship as illustrated below:

There are a lot of different things that the kids bring in, things that I bring in and there’s the connection between certain kids and certain relationships that is another factor as well. (Brad Interview)

Participants (7) expressed their belief that the student’s family experience impacted their capacity to develop positive relationships with their teachers (Cath, Kylie, Sue, Barb, Brad, Rita, Alex). They suggested that an experience of trauma, lack of role
models, disruptive home life and the experiences of recently arrived students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds potentially impacted the student’s capacity to develop positive relationships in the school setting.

The participants also believed that the parent-child relationship could influence the teacher-student relationship. During the focus group the participants discussed the model of relationships experienced in students’ families. In their opinion, a positive parent-child relationship contributed to the student’s capacity to be open to the possibility of having a positive relationship with the teacher (Cath Focus Group). They also noted that experiencing a negative relationship model at home may lead to the child feeling confused when experiencing a nurturing relationship at school (Mary Focus Group). The participants believed that the teacher may be the only model of a positive relationship for the child and that the school may provide the only safe haven for them. (Barb, Cath, Rita Focus Group).

I do think student’s prior experiences have a really huge impact. Like I said if they have had negative experiences in educational contexts before or if they have not been able to trust role models or attachment figures in their life, that usually makes you have to work much harder and prove that you are trust worthy and that you are reliable and that you are caring and supportive over a longer period of time before they will maybe potentially want to enter into that relationship. Other children will be desperate to form a relationship because they maybe haven’t got that role model or figure (so it can work either way) and will be throwing themselves at any adult that will potentially listen to them or take the time to do an activity with them. (Cath Interview)

It was the view of five participants that a student’s individual attributes such as specific learning challenges, having English as a second language and mental health issues such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder had a potential to impact their relationship
with teachers (Cath, Kylie, Sue, Barb, Rita). Four of the participants believed the student’s prior learning experience was a factor influencing the relationship (Cath, Kylie, Rita, Alex).

I think it can sometimes be difficult with children who have, or maybe difficult is not the right word, but the relationship may look different, it may sound different if a child has some sort of developmental difference. (Cath Interview)

4.2.2.2 The parents.

The participants expressed the view that the role of the parent within the teacher-student-parent triad impacted on the teacher-student relationship. The place of parents within the parent-teacher relationship and the parent-child relationship elicited passionate and varied responses from participants. For one participant, it appeared that a specific teacher-parent relationship had been so negative it had become the lens through which subsequent parent-teacher relationships were being viewed.

While other sub-themes within the data analysis presented a common pattern of responses, the findings associated with parents presented the greatest variations. Participants differed in their view on the degree to which parents had the potential to impact on the teacher-student relationship. At one end of the continuum two participants agreed that the parent role had minimal potential for impacting on the relationship. At the other end of the continuum, three participants argued that the teacher-parent relationship had the potential to powerfully impact, either positively or negatively, on teacher-student relationships.
The following quote sits at one end of the continuum, with the view that parents, while present within the teacher-student-parent triad, have minimal potential to influence the teacher’s capacity to develop a relationship with a student.

*I think it is nice if you can get on with the parents and you can get a lot of the information but I don’t find that... you do have occasional parent who can’t relate to you properly and I don’t find that that is a barrier to forming a relationship with the child at all.* (Barb Focus Group)

In contrast the other participants perceived parents did have potential to positively and negatively influence the teacher-student relationship.

Potential to negatively influence the teacher-student relationship.

*So that [parent] personality disorder style is the extreme, but even the parents who come up constantly criticising or questioning what you do and any difference that comes out and I instinctually find myself backing away from that child and thinking if you don’t care, whether or not I form a relationship with your child why should I. And I can’t help that.* (Mary Focus Group)

Potential to positively influence the teacher-student relationship.

*But if you’re thinking in a positive context you know if you can have a really great relationship with parents, it’s not just the relationship that’s modelled, it’s a security or affirmation that gives the child, but you can find out so much more about the child and learn so much more about the child...they can be such an important form of communication and allow you to really get to know that child at another level which can assist you in a lot of your interaction and in your teaching and learning.* (Cath Focus Group)

Although there appeared to be no animosity between participants, one participant voiced the need to justify her response (Mary Focus Group). It was also the only time that participants openly challenged the views of others (Focus Group).
Brad: …Often you don’t see Dad… and sometimes you never see him.

Mary: You know but I don’t find that a hindrance.

Kylie: I quite love it (not seeing parents).

Mary: If the parents are there and interested great, if they are not you still form an equally deep relationship.

Brad: I don’t think it affects the ability I just think it makes the connection deeper.

Barb: I don’t at all.

Kylie: I don’t either and so if I see them at parent teacher interviews…It doesn’t make my relationship any deeper with the children or improve because of that.

Brad: Even if you got a better understanding of how or why they are going the way they are going for them?

Barb and Kylie: No no.

Barb: If there is extreme case and there are like court orders yes you need to know, but if it’s an ordinary family, nice to know the parents, but if you don’t, I don’t think…I still think I have just as deep a relationship with those children if I don’t see their parents.

The participants believed that the teacher-student relationship is not dependent on there being a relationship between the students parent and the teacher, however they recognised that the triadic teacher-student-parent relationship had potential to impact to a greater or lesser degree on the teacher-student relationship.

4.2.3 Environment.

The third theme ‘Environment’ includes the sub-themes of leadership and culture, collegial support, student cohort and miscellaneous.
4.2.3.1 Leadership and culture.

When participants were asked: “What do you think would help teachers to be able to approach the teacher-student relationship from a mindfully aware stance?” their response was leadership (Focus Group). There was consensus that leadership was key in setting the tone and culture of the school. The participants expressed a strong belief that it is the responsibility of school leadership to develop a culture that values teacher-student relationships. This, they believed, results in the implementation of procedures and structures that provide on-going support to teachers, enabling them to build relationships with their students. Participants believed a positive school culture is created by a school leader who approaches school organisation and structures through the lens of promoting the importance of relationships (Kylie, Cath, Brad Focus Group). The following extracts illustrate this:

*I think there has to be focus or importance put on it [relationships] by leadership* (Kylie Focus Group).

...so coming back to school leadership, if they place an importance on the culture of the practice and it’s something that is always on the radar... (Brad Focus Group).

*And so I guess it is how time is prioritized and if the school believes that the relationships are the essence of future learning and student wellbeing...that becomes a priority* (Cath Focus Group).

4.2.3.2 Collegial support.

Teaching colleagues and staffing allocations were identified as factors within the participants’ environment that impacted on their teacher-student relationships. In particular, the participants indicated that the availability of support staff, working within a team and team-teaching as facilitating the building of teacher-student relationships.
For the participants, the presence of a second teacher in the room provided both physical and managerial support, the outcomes of which reflect the earlier discussion on the use of time, the practice of teacher reflection and the capacity for flexibility. The participants believed the additional staffing allowed the division of classes into smaller groups, releasing the classroom teacher and enabling greater capacity to respond to the individual needs of the students (Mary Focus Group). Team teaching was identified as enabling a teacher to step back from a situation and reflect on the current situation (Brad Focus Group), and as engendering a sense of sharing of the load (Cath, Barb, Brad Focus Group). The presence of a second teacher also allowed for flexibility in the teachers’ response to the needs of individual students and changing situations in the classroom (Mary, Barb Focus Group). The following extracts from the focus group captures the discussion on the impact of collegial support:

Individual student support

*And having those other teacher teachers meant that you could teach them you could differentiate the needs and that communicated a sense of support, individual support more than it would of if we were on our own* (Mary Focus Group).

Teacher reflection

*...you need that support to be able to set back and then reflect and then go I am going to change my tack.* (Brad Focus group).

Debriefing

*Having that shared responsibility is a huge difference. You have someone you can talk to about those sorts of issues...you don’t feel this overwhelming sense of responsibility just on your self* (Cath Focus Group).

Flexibility

*...when you have someone come in and you can’t say we wont do maths now I have to deal with this child’s problem, so if there are two of you one of you can go on teaching while you take the child off.* (Barb Focus Group).
The participants believed that working within a school culture that valued relationships and reflected this value through its staffing structures impacted their response to the student cohort and their capacity to build positive teacher-student relationships.

4.2.3.3 Student cohort.

The sub-theme of ‘student cohort’ drew together factors of student behaviour and class composition. Prior to discussing each of these factors it is relevant to consider the atmosphere in the interviews and focus group when these issues were discussed.

Throughout the interviews and focus group when participants were sharing their experiences of difficult classes and students, while it appeared there was a sense of sadness and frustration there was not a sense that these experiences were overwhelming. As the participants shared their experiences they appeared to maintain a sense of agency and positiveness rather than despair and powerlessness in the midst of the reality of challenging situations. Participants appeared to neither gloss over the challenges that particular student cohorts presented nor did they appear to be weighed down or burdened by them. These experiences were presented as an accepted part of the milieu of teaching.

Five participants mentioned student behaviour within the context of discussing student cohorts (Sue, Mary, Barb, Rita, Alex). These participants perceived that needing to focus on classroom management and student behaviour was a distracting factor when developing relationships with students. These participants believed that behaviour needed to be managed for relationships to be built. The extract below is reflective of the responses of participants:
That makes it more about controlling behaviour rather than forming relationships so you can get what you need to get done...and you don’t have time to sit with them one on one and work out why. (Mary Interview)

Class composition was a factor within student cohort. In particular the lack of support provided to a participant when they encountered complex class composition was believed to have a negative impact on building relationships with students:

And hindering factors...So large groups that have kids with really extreme behavioural issues or needs or backgrounds from home...(Sue Interview)

The findings on student cohort reflect the prior findings on school culture and the importance of time within developing relationships with students. When discussing student cohort, two participants spoke of the importance of time, continuity of teachers and the need for a belief in the positive impact of building relationships when dealing with a large cohort of students with challenging behaviours and experiences. The following extract illustrates the perceived impact of school culture, time and staffing allocation on a participant’s response to the student cohort (Focus Group).

Student cohort and a positive school culture.

But having I would say about 80-90% of our cohort were high learning needs was really challenging. But what happens we also taught these kids over a number of years...But I would teach that kid the next year, and the door would open a little bit more and gradually over time they saw that you are going to be here with them and they let you in (Brad Focus Group)

But it’s something that we focused on and we were all heavily invested in. It was a priority to all of us. (Cath Focus Group)

Student cohort and an unsupportive school culture.

...semi-rural school, which was in a very low socio demographic and about 70% were involved in DHS and very very difficult life circumstances for
many of those children. And a lot of those children could were in larger cohorts and each year they were going to a different teacher, and their view of teachers and teacher relationships was on the whole quite negative because the teachers were constantly faced with so many barriers to developing good relationships with their students and that reciprocity wasn’t there because these kids didn’t know a positive relationship and were almost rebelling and rejecting. They were almost safeguarding themselves (Cath Focus Group).

4.2.4 Miscellaneous.

Braun and Clarke (2006) note the importance of including data that appears to depart from the dominant codes or patterns. There were a group of miscellaneous factors relating to the influence of the school environment, which were identified in the interview analysis and presented at the focus group for consideration:

- Unfamiliar course content or year level experience (3)
- Ongoing teacher professional development (1)
- Casual relief work (1)
- Workload (2)
- Department pressure (1)
- Assessment (1)
- Teacher gender and age (2).

(The bracket denotes the number of participants who raised this issue)

Gender and age were mentioned briefly in light of a student’s changing capacity to build relationships (Cath Focus Group). The two male participants perceived constraints in the form of gender-based protocols or thinking that governed their interaction with students. It was believed that these directly impacted on their capacity to approach teacher-student relationships in the manner they felt was natural. In the
discussion they reported the following experiences: being *super conscious* ...*not wanting to be too touchy with them*...and...*having a session with my principal on this is how you have to interact with your kids, as a male* (Alex, Brad Focus Group).

The participants did not mention workload or assessment as having an influence on the teacher-student relationships. Given the discussion of performativity in the literature review, this was an unexpected outcome.

To summarise the findings within the theme ‘Environment’ the participants identified the importance of school leaders in establishing the culture of the school (Brad, Cath, Kylie, Alex Focus Group) and placing teacher-student relationships as a priority (Cath Focus Group). This, they believed, influences the provision of support (Alex Focus Group) and staff allocation (Mary, Alex Focus Group). The participants believed that these factors impact on their capacity to build positive relationships with their students.

In summary the findings presented through the thematic analysis identified the key factors that participants perceived as impacting on their relationships with students were identified were: ‘Teacher’, ‘Other’ and ‘Environment’. ‘Teacher’ included the data related to the individual teacher: their experiences and their responses. ‘Other’ included the role of the student and the parent, while ‘Environment’ included the data related to the structures and organisational influences experienced by the teacher. To address the second research question, the lens of mentalisation will now be employed to examine and interpret these factors.
4.3 Examining Factors Using the Theory of Mentalisation

Prior to continuing it may be helpful to briefly revisit the theory of mentalisation. Mentalisation describes the way in which humans make sense of their social world by holding in mind the needs, desires, beliefs.

Using the theory of mentalisation to examine the factors that participants perceived as impacting on their relationships with students the following themes were identified: reflection on relationships, reciprocity, resilience and a safe and supportive environment.

4.3.1 Reflection on relationships.

Within the framework of mentalisation, and supported by other relevant literature, this may suggest that the process of reflection may assist the teacher to make sense of prior relationship experiences and enhance their capacity to ‘hold in mind the self’, which in turn contributes to their capacity to provide a secure base for the students as they ‘hold in mind the other’.

The findings from the initial analysis suggest that the making sense of prior relationship experiences through reflection influences a teacher’s approach to building healthy teacher-student relationships. The participants reported engaging in a process of reflection on their prior relationship experiences. They identified the outcomes of this process as contributing to their healthy teacher-student relationships. It is not only the experiences per se that are critical, but also how the outcomes of the reflection process contribute to subsequent relationships.
Relationship experiences are central to mentalisation theory. Mentalisation acknowledges the role of early relationship experiences in promoting neurological development and laying the foundation for subsequent relationships. Theory of mind, the capacity to acknowledge the existence and identify mental states in others, is developed through early relationships and is a vital component of healthy relationships. Attachment theory predicts that it is the early relationship experience with the primary caregiver that provides the child with a sense of security thus enabling them to explore the world around them. The role of the caregiver as a secure attachment relationship is reported to contribute to the child’s capacity to ultimately make sense of another’s mind and then their own.

This understanding of the influence of prior relationship experiences to current relationships resonates with the concept of the inner working model. The inner working model is developed through a person’s primary relationship experiences and “…contains generalized information about the self, others, and self-other relationships that shape development of new relationships” (Spilt et al., 2001, p. 463). Riley (2011, 2013) suggests that when teachers understand the presence and function of their inner working model it can assist them in adjusting their interactions with different students. Day (2004), Palmer (1998) and Salzberger-Wittenberg and Osbourne (1999) identify that making sense of prior relationship experiences through reflection positively contributes to the teacher establishing healthy relationships with their students. This would indicate that the concept of the inner working model and its impact on subsequent relationships provides a useful tool to examine and consider the perceptions of the participants.
The influence of prior relationship experiences on the development of the inner working model was not a factor restricted to teachers. A healthy teacher-student relationship recognises the influence of the prior relationship experiences and subsequent inner working model of the student and parents through the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

4.3.2 Reciprocity.

The literature identifies a mentalising relationship as one where there is a meeting of minds between two people, where each is important to the other and where each matters to the other. This characteristic of reciprocity within mentalisation highlights how it is different from empathy and mindfulness (see Figure 1). The notion of reciprocity may be reflected in the participants’ awareness of the influence of the student’s own relationship experiences and inner working model on establishing a relationship where both are held in each other’s mind. They recognised that a student’s prior relationship experiences, particularly with their parents, has potential to influence their capacity to fully participate in a healthy relationship with their teacher. This could explain participants’ experience that establishing healthy relationships with some students presented a greater challenge than developing relationships with other students.

The participants’ view of the influence of parents on healthy teacher-student relationships varied. It could be suggested that the parents’ attachment experience and inner working model may indirectly impact the teacher-student relationship via the parent-student relationship.
What can be taken from examining these factors through the theory of mentalisation is a need for greater understanding and appreciation of the complexity of the healthy teacher-student relationship. This relationship necessitates the teachers to have the capacity to not only make sense of and hold in mind their own relationship experiences, but also incorporate the holding in mind of the student and the network of past experiences that they bring to the relationship.

4.3.3 Resilience.

Allen et al. (2003) suggest that experiencing mentalising relationships contributes, among other things, to a person’s capacity to make sense out of adversity, to sustain a positive outlook, to experience a sense of agency and to respond more flexibly to negative experiences. Similarities can be noted between the participants’ self reported characteristics and the characteristics of a person who has experienced mentalising relationships.

The initial analysis identified common themes of flexibility, optimism and a sense of agency in participant responses. All participants believed they had the capacity to flexibly respond to and learn from difficult situations. Their responses displayed a sense of optimism in the midst of the challenges, and expressed a sense of agency gained through drawing positive learning outcomes from adverse school cultures and experiences.

Participation in healthy teacher-student relationships may be a factor contributing to the participants’ capacity for resilience. The literature suggests that healthy teacher-student relationships serve to reinforce and strengthen a teacher’s sense of wellbeing. Fonagy
et al. (2011b) suggest that the mentalising relationship provides nurture to the nurturer. Within the context of the teacher-student relationship this could be seen as the teacher (nurturer) also being nurtured by the student, a process also described by Riley (2011; 2013). Riley (2011; 2013) argues that it is a teacher’s ability to form and maintain relationships with students that impacts on his or her perceptions of success or failure as a professional and sense of wellbeing. Spilt et al. (2011) suggest that the positive teacher-student relationship contributes to a teacher’s feeling of effectiveness, competence and agency.

This capacity for resilience may act as a protective factor for the teachers in response to the current educational climate. The literature review suggests a ‘culture of performativity’, characterised by an emphasis on reporting, standardised curriculum, and bureaucratic demands currently exists in education (Apple 2004; Avis 2005). Comber and Nixon (2009) and Day (2004) attribute to this culture the heightening of emotional states of many teachers, including increased anxiety and a reduced capacity to build and maintain positive relationships. In contrast the participants in this study did not appear to be dominated by the negativity or anxiety attributed to the ‘culture of performativity’. This was a surprising finding. It could be suggested that the capacity for resilience acts as a protective factor in response to the culture of performativity. The capacity for resilience enables the teachers to focus on building healthy relationships with students, which in turn contributes to strengthening their own sense of wellbeing.

4.3.4 Safe and Supportive Environment.

Experiencing an emotionally safe and supportive environment has been identified within mentalisation theory as an essential precondition for a person to exercise their
capacity to mentalise (Twemlow et al., 2005). This precondition enables the activation of the capacity to hold the self and other in mind within valued and trusting reciprocal relationships (Allen et al., 2005; Fonagy et al., 2011a).

The presence of a safe and supportive environment is relevant to both teacher and student. Willshire (1999) highlights the contribution of an emotionally safe environment to a sense of containment for teachers, where they feel supported rather than overwhelmed by the demands of their role. This sense of containment allows them to respond in positive and creative ways, assisting them to provide a containing relationship for the students. Through providing a secure base the teacher enables the student to experience healthy relationships, which in turn develops their capacity to make sense of another’s mind as they make sense of their own (Allen 2003; Fonagy et al., 2004; Jurist, 2010). This capacity within the student supports them to more fully engage in healthy relationships with the teacher, which in turn contributes to the teacher’s sense of wellbeing. This process again recognises the concept of reciprocity within the healthy teacher-student relationship.

The participants identified the school environment as a factor directly impacting on healthy teacher-student relationships. They described a positive school culture as one that values the contribution of relationships to social and academic learning. This culture shapes the processes and procedural decisions relating to staff placement, classroom support and student cohort. The role of school leadership was identified as pivotal in establishing this safe and supportive school culture. This factor is also recognised within an ecological model of schools in conjunction with the impact of the school community, including its history and location, and government influences
These findings resonate with the work of Peterson (2002) who highlights the key role of the leadership in not only creating the culture but also shaping and maintaining it through modelling their interactions with staff (see also Leithwood and Beatty, 2008).

Looking at the findings through the lens of mentalisation, it can be suggested that a positive school culture enables the teacher to experience the necessary sense of safety and support required to establish and maintain healthy relationships with their students. This in turn enables them to create a safe and supportive classroom environment necessary for the students to participate in healthy teacher-student relationships.

In conclusion, the development of healthy teacher-student relationships, viewed through the lens of mentalisation, could be represented as a cyclical process that takes place within a facilitating environment (see Figure 4). The cycle includes the teacher engaging in reflection as a means of making sense of their prior relationship experiences. The outcomes of this reflection contribute to their approach to establishing a secure base for students as they develop healthy teacher-student relationships, characterised by reciprocity and a meeting of the minds. In turn, these healthy relationships positively impact on the teacher’s sense of wellbeing and capacity for resilience, allowing them to meet the challenges of various relationships (including parents and students) and the environment. This positive orientation frees their capacity to be able to reflect more deeply on their relationship experiences, which in turn influences subsequent relationships. For this process to occur it requires a facilitating
environment where the teacher and student experience a sense of being emotionally safe and supported.

Figure 4. Healthy Teacher-Student Relationships through the Lens of Mentalisation
Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 Key Findings
The contribution of teacher-student relationships to academic outcomes and student wellbeing is widely accepted. This small-scale study sought to identify factors impacting on teacher-student relationships from the perspective of teachers and to examine those factors though the lens of mentalisation theory. The findings from this research contribute to current the understandings of healthy teacher-student relationships and suggest potential contributions of the theory of mentalisation to understanding these relationships.

A healthy teacher-student relationship is one where there is a reciprocal relationship between a teacher and student that informs social interaction. This relationship enhances the capacity for resilience through creating a sense of meaning, value and wellbeing in the teacher and student through a process of holding the self and other in mind. This study has identified the teacher’s capacity to reflect on prior relationship experiences and the presence of a safe and supportive environment as key factors that impact on this healthy relationship.

5.2 Mentalisation
This research suggests that the theory of mentalisation can contribute to the understanding of factors impacting on healthy teacher-student relationships and the development and strengthening of safe and supportive school communities. Mentalisation provides a new framework for discussing the way in which people make
sense of their social world by holding in mind the needs, desires, beliefs, and goals that underpin their own and other’s behaviours within social interactions. It extends the notion of mindfulness by encompassing reflection on past, present and future and incorporates the notion of empathy for both self and for others. As such, mentalising relationships contribute to the development of the capacity for resilience, and highlight the influence of teacher reflection as a tool to understand self and others.

5.3 Implications for Practice

This study began as a response to challenges faced implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools. Biggs et al. (2008), Nind & Weare, (2009), Jennings (2011) and Payton, et al. (2008) have identified the quality of teacher-student relationships and a teacher’s emotional capacity as factors impacting on effectiveness in the implementation of SEL programs.

Few professional learning programs address teachers’ own social and emotional learning and most of those that do appear to be based on an approach of teaching skills and strategies. Although this approach may have positive outcomes, it does not appear to consider the complexity of the teacher-student relationship. An example of this skills and strategies approach is evident in Howard and Johnson’s (2004) study of resilience as a key to resisting stress and burnout. Howard and Johnson write: “This study suggests that protective factors that can make a real difference in teachers’ lives are often relatively simple to organize, easy to support and/or are learnable” (p. 416). They state that: “The strategy of de-personalising stressful incidents is a simple [author italics] one that senior staff and colleagues in any school can teach new teachers and that students can be taught in their teacher education courses” (p. 416). This example of
a skills and strategies approach to managing stress and developing resilience appears to suggest a ‘one-size fits all’ approach. It does not appear to consider research that identifies relationship experiences as a pivotal factor in the development of resilience (e.g., the work of Pianta & Walsh 1998; Fonagy et al., 2011a). Such approaches also appear to assume that all schools provide all teachers with an experience of being emotionally safe and supported for the desired learning to take place. This critique of the skills and strategies approach aligns with Riley’s (2011) view that teaching is often seen as a purely rational and logical activity, and that the influence of a teacher’s prior experiences and emotions within the classroom has been denied due consideration.

Riley’s (2011) Contextual Insight-Navigated Discussion (CIND) intervention provides one alternative to the skills and strategy approach to developing teacher capacity through incorporating the opportunity for reflection on relationship experiences. Riley worked with teachers who had displayed aggressive behaviour towards students, aiming to assist them in discovering “…how their relationship history, including attachment style, impacted on their perception and therefore management of classroom relationships” (p. 66). The initial results from this intervention were promising.

The Dax Centre in Melbourne is developing another alternative approach, Enhancing Emotional Literacy through Visual Arts (ELVA). ELVA is designed to use visual arts as a tool for children to make sense of their emotional world (needs, desires, beliefs and goals) as means to enhance their emotional literacy. The teacher professional learning component incorporates both theoretical input and experiential visual arts activities that incorporate reflection on experience. The ELVA approach is informed by psychoanalytic theory, and neuroscience. It is framed around the understanding of the
importance of supporting the capacity of the teacher to provide a secure base and containing figure for students, and on the necessity of creating a safe and supportive environment for both teachers and students. The recruitment process for schools applying to be part of the training includes informed commitment by school leadership and an alignment between the ELVA approach and the school’s wellbeing policies and strategies.

The University of Melbourne Centre for Program Evaluation conducted an evaluation of ELVA. Astbury and Aston (2013) evaluated the initial pilot phase of ELVA involving eight schools, 22 teachers and over 2000 students. The evaluation reports that through teacher professional learning and program implementation in schools, many of the teachers indicated they had developed greater emotional self-awareness and had a greater understanding of how their thoughts and emotions could impact on students. Teachers reported being more reflective, empathetic and mindful, and that “…the training had ‘changed the way they teach, and think about teaching’” (p.33). They also reported that ELVA gave them a greater awareness of the importance of creating a safe and supportive environment when encouraging students to express emotions.

Research is continuing to assess the potential of this model in assisting teachers and students to reflect on, and make sense of their inner working model, to create safe and supportive environments and develop healthy teacher-student relationships.

*Creating a Peaceful School Learning Environment* (CAPSLE), the mentalisation-based intervention for schools developed by Twemlow et al. (2005), seeks to provide an alternative to addressing issues of wellbeing through focussing on relationships and
addressing power imbalances within the school community (Biggs et al., 2008). Twemlow et al. (2005) refer to CAPSLE as a philosophy rather than a program and draw distinction between their approach and other more formal manualised and prescriptive programs that contain specific directions and instruction. The latter, they claim, lead to poor fidelity and follow-through when the initial phase of implementation is complete. CAPSLE emphasises the importance of understanding how the school system works from a mentalising power dynamics perspective. This perspective, they believe allows the individual teachers and students to design innovative ways of creating a positive social climate in the school. It is through collaborative relationships that the teachers and students develop responses to strengthen mentalisation in the school community. A three-year cluster randomized control trial involving 1345 grade three to five students from nine elementary schools was undertaken (Fonagy, et al., 2009) to evaluate the effectiveness of the CAPSLE approach. The results from the study of CAPSLE show there was a decrease in peer reported victimisation, aggression and aggressive bystanding, off-task behaviour and disruptive classroom behaviour. In the follow-up year, the reduction in victimisation, aggression and aggressive bystanding remained. A similar approach was implemented in a Jamaican school dominated by violence and prejudice (Twemlow 2011). The evaluation of this approach indicated increases in the students’ sense of safety, a decrease in threatening behaviour and a greater engagement in educational opportunities. Approaches based on CAPSLE model have also been implemented in Australia and Hungary, but as they have not published evaluations.
5.4 Limitations

Every research design has to juggle various limitations. Patton (2002) states, “… there are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs. Limited resources, limited time, and limits on the human ability to grasp the complex nature of social reality necessitate trade-offs” (p. 223). Although appropriate for the task, the small number of participants was the greatest limitation of this research.

The process of recruitment was through purposive sampling. The criteria requiring teachers to identify with a statement regarding teacher-student relationships may have reduced the number and variety of participants from the initial group. The recruitment process encouraged participation by teachers who agreed with a mindfully aware approach to teacher-student relationships. As potential participants were required to volunteer their time for no substantive return this may also have limited the number volunteering to be part of the research. It would be interesting to repeat the study with a wider group of teachers.

This study has identified, from participants' perspectives, factors that impact on healthy teacher-student relationships. These factors were examined and interpreted through the lens of mentalisation. It concluded that healthy teacher-student relationships are reciprocal relationships incorporating a process of holding the self and other in mind. These relationships contribute to creating a sense of meaning, value and wellbeing for the teacher and student. This study suggests that providing teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their own relationship experiences and the presence of a safe and supportive school environment facilitates their capacity to develop healthy relationships.
with students. The reciprocal nature of the healthy teacher-student relationship suggests that by providing the student with a secure base within a safe and supportive environment, the teacher will assist the student in developing their capacity to more fully participate in this model of relationship. This study also concluded that the theory of mentalisation contributes to and informs the development of healthy teacher-student relationships.
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Appendix A

The Four Functional Polarities of Mentalisation

1. Implicit-Explicit
Implicit is the automatic responses involving the holding of our own and other’s thoughts in mind. An example to illustrate this process is turn taking when having a conversation. Without consciously thinking about the process, we listen to and hold the other person’s mind in ours as we respond and appropriately take turns. Explicit mentalisation is the deliberate and conscious act of imagining the mental states of another. The therapist works consciously to hold the client’s mind, while encouraging the client to hold their mental states (Allen et al., 2003; Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008).

2. Internal Focus-External Focus
The focus of the internal is the consideration of thoughts, feelings and experiences. The external is the consideration of the physical and visible features or actions. Both the internal and the external considerations are factors that assist in making sense of the self and the other. This inturn contributes to our understanding of the situation and interactions (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008).

3. Self Orientated-Other Orientated
Within the concept of mentalisation there is the concept of the object, the self and the other. The mentalisation between these two objects is a dynamic process involving the thoughts, intentions, motives desires, beliefs and needs of each. Through interaction, the understanding one has of the other is continually noted and responded to within the
“interpersonal milieu” (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008, p. 1128). This is supported by the research that concludes, “…envisioning the mind of another is underpinned by the same brain systems as identifying one’s own thoughts and feelings” (Fonagy & Luyton, 2009, p. 1361). In other words as we imagine the mind of another, our brain mirrors the response within us (Decety & Jackson, 2006).

4. Cognitive-Affective

There is an acknowledgement that the content (the desires, thoughts and feelings) involved within a mentalising relationship have both a cognitive focus and affective presence. Mentalisation requires the cognitive skill to image the mental states with “…plausibility, flexibility and complexity”, combining cognitive reasoning with emotional insight (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008, p. 1128).
Appendix B

Fonagy and Target’s Summary of Some of the Key Neural Systems Involved in Mentalising

Fonagy and Target (as cited in Jurist et al., 2008) draw together extant research to examine the neural systems involved in mentalising and conclude that mentalisation involves the interconnected activation of four cortical systems:

1. The middle pre-frontal areas, “...recruited when thinking about beliefs and representing the implicit ability to infer mental state” (p. 18).
2. The posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS) and the temporo-parietal junction (TPj) “...responsible for perspective taking and recognising motion in a social context” (p. 18).
3. The amygdala “...used in attaching reward values to stimuli and decoding the emotional content of facial expressions” (p. 18).
4. The temporal poles “...recruited when understanding social scripts are invoked to understand interpersonal interactions” (p.18).
Appendices

Appendix C

Expression of Interest Document

Dear Colleagues

My name is Margaret Nixon and I am currently undertaking a Master in Education at The University of Melbourne. I am about to begin research in August 2012 that is focused on student-teacher relationships.

I am looking for classroom teachers to participate in the research who identify the following approach within their teacher practice.

A positive student-teacher relationship requires teachers to be mindfully aware of both themselves, and their student/s, and to integrate this awareness into their interactions and decision-making in the school context.

The central focus underpinning this study is to understand the factors that teachers identify as hindering or facilitating their capacity to be mindfully aware within the context of student-teacher relationships.

If you would like to express an interest in participating in this study please email m.nixon3@student.unimelb.edu.au
Appendix D

Format of Semi-Structured Interviews

As you are aware, this study is about student-teacher relationships.

1. I was wondering how would you describe your approach to building positive relationships with your students?

2. What do you think your relationships with your students look and sound like? What would others see and hear as they observed you relating to the students?

3. How do you think the students would describe the way you relate to them?

4. A. Can you identify a time when you have developed really positive relationships with a student or class?

   B. What do you think allowed you to develop such positive relationships in this situation?

   **Prompts:** What was different about this situation? What factors helped you to do this?

5. A. Can you share a time in your teaching where you really struggled with developing a positive relationship with a student or class?

   B. Why do you think this situation was challenging for you?

   **Prompt:** What factors do you think were impacting on this situation?

6. Can you please tell me a little about your understanding of the concept of empathy?

7. Could you tell me a little about your understanding of the concept of self-awareness?

8. What place do you think empathy and self-awareness play in your approach to student-teacher relationships?
10. What would you identify as the key facilitating or hindering factors that have the greatest impact on your capacity to develop positive student relationships?

11. Is there anything more that you would like to add, issues that you think we have not covered or a comment or observation you would like to add before we finish?

Additional Questions

1. Could you give a little of your history and background.
   
   I. Age
   
   II. Pathway to teaching
   
   III. History in Teaching
   
   IV. Current role
   
   V. School demographic population (including parents)
   
   VI. Why did you agree to do the interview?

2. Where do you think your approach to teacher student relationships stem from?
Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

Introduction

1. Welcome to participants.

Thanks for participating in this focus group. Responses gathered today will contribute to the research, which hopefully will inform future practices. You all initially responded to an Expression of Interest where you identified with the following statement ‘A positive student-teacher relationship requires teachers to be mindfully aware of both themselves, and their student/s, and to integrate this awareness into their interactions and decision-making in the school context.’ You have all participated in an interview. From the interview I have identified some trends and patterns in the factors that affect student-teacher relationships and the capacity to be mindfully aware. This focus group will provide us with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of these factors

Ground Rules

Before we start it is important to understand some shared ground rules.

- The sharing that occurs stays in the room
- Notes will be taken
- In the final report however no names will be included
- As we indicated the group is being audiotaped
- There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested to hear all ideas, experiences and opinions, negative and positive
- Given that we have a time constraint, there is a need to keep moving, while still allowing time for the questions to be fully explored

Are there any other questions before we continue?
Let’s start by going around the room and introducing yourself, your school and current role.

**Part One**

*We will initially explore what appears to be a connection between your relationship experiences, and your approach to teacher student relationships. Let's begin by looking at some of the trends that have emerged from the interviews.*

Firstly it was clear that TSR (teacher-student relationships) was valued

### Approach to Building Relationships

The patterns that emerged regarding the teacher-student relationships you are aiming for are characterised by:

- Knowing kids individually
- Letting them know they are cared for and listened to and known
- There is an emphasis that it is not just listening but REALLY listening and GENUINELY caring
- It is about nurturing and being as a parent to them (yet clear of the distinction)
- Clear, fair and consistent boundaries, taking individual needs into consideration while juggling the needs of the class

1. **Any other comments people would like to add?**

*Let’s hold those initial trends as we look at relationship experience. This information was gathered through the additional question I asked*

### Relationship Experiences

This additional question asked; “Where do you think your approach to teacher student relationship stems from?” There is indication that your approach to relationship stems from the following: Family experience of relationships Schooling experience, Colleagues, Life experiences and Theory

The one-to-one interviews revealed some patterns and trends in relation to your relationship experiences, the culture of your classrooms and your approach to building positive teacher-student relationships. Some of you used very similar language when describing your relationship experience and classroom culture, and relationships.

2. **Would you like to comment on the way you run relationships- lets talk about that.**

*Prompts: To what extent do you think your relationship experiences impacts on your teacher-student relationships?*
Is this something you were aware of, or is it a surprise to you?

Part Two: Factors that support and hinder

Parents

It seems as if the lack of capacity to build a relationship with the parents directly impacts the capacity to build relationships with students. There was also evidence that positive relationships with parents lead to a deeper connection with the students, influenced the teacher-student relationship and the level of engagement in the learning of the student. Not all of you mentioned this as a factor.

2. Can we spend some time exploring what it is about the nature of the parent teacher relationship that impacts our relationship with the student?

I would like to concentrate more on the nature of the relationship than on individual experiences.

b. If you do not identify parents as being a factor in teacher student relationships I am interested to know how you view the parent teacher relationship.

Time

Time is a factor mentioned by each of you within relationship building. Time was seen as

- Interacting with the students
- Spending time moving around
- Generally seeing your role as one that is interacting with the students in various ways over the day.
- There was no examples of wanting to set work in order to be left alone.
- Not only class time but interested in the time students spend out of school and interacting during recess, lunch, after school and weekends.

There was a clear association between time and developing positive relationships. A lack of time negatively impacted the relationship.

Time is clearly a factor in teacher student relationships. I was surprised that a lack of time was not strongly brought out.

4. Do you want to make more comment about time and relationships?

Prompt: How much do you think your approach to time is influenced by your experience of relationships?

Cohort
The cohort of students was a factor mentioned including class sizes and behaviour management

5. What is it about the cohort that impact relationships?

Prompts: Is it the number of students or the cohort of students? Which do you think has the greatest impact on you capacity to build relationships?
What do you see as the link between behaviour management and building relationships? Do we build a relationship in order to establish behaviour management or is it the other way round?

Student Prior Experience

The responses fell into four categories:

1. Immediate experiences in the yard and with peers,
2. The prior educational experiences
3. Family experiences, including experiences of trauma or ESL student
4. The person of the child e.g. they had an intellectual impairment or a diagnosis such as ADHD

6. What is it about prior experience that makes the relationship more difficult?

(Prompt: Is it the fact that these students are harder to read and understand, get a handle on, or is it their behaviours that gets in the way- behaviour management, or perhaps our lack of knowledge in the appropriate approach for the specific need of the student?)

Other

This is a list of other factors that were mentioned:

- The role of School leadership
- Support: knowing and having access to good support.
- Unfamiliar content or year level
- The impact of working in a team
- Gender and Age
- Work load
- Ongoing PD
- CRT work
- The impact of the environment you work in: one that values wellbeing and one that is positive and aimed at solving problems
- Department pressure
- Assessment

7. We are going to spend a bit of time ranking them in order of greatest impact.

Part Three: Future Responses
Some of you said that involvement in the interview was helpful as it provided an opportunity for you to reflect on your practice.

8. What do you think would help teachers to be able to approach their teacher-student relationships from a mindfully aware stance?

9. Before we conclude is there any further comment people would like to make?
Appendices

Appendix F

Sample of Transcripts

The Interview

Method:

- The audit trail was composed of a code that identified the question e.g. Q2; and the line of the response e.g. L1.
- This code was removed within the body of the report to assist in clarity of presentation of the data.
- The pseudonym for the participant is provided in the report along with the origin of the excerpt e.g. Cath Interview.

Example:

*Researcher: What do you think your relationship with your students looks like and sounds like? If someone was walking through your area where you’re teaching what would they see and what would they hear and what would the surroundings be like?*

*Cath:*

Q2L1 I think there would be a buzz, there would be a lot happening, it would be an excitable buzz or sometimes it would be calmer pace, a relaxed state. It would look at though people were connecting, but there were opportunity for people to work independently if they wanted to. You would see people doing lots of different things at any point in time, but there would also be times when we are together doing something as a group. I guess anyone coming into the space would maybe see something different depending on the time that they actually entered. Generally the interactions are always warm and positive and if there are any interactions between other students that aren’t so positive that’s when I would be involving myself to assist. um The relationships that I have would appear to someone as being supportive built on trust, kind, caring, reciprocal and forthcoming in that you know people are actively working towards building and maintaining the relationships from both sides.

The Focus Group

Method:

- The audit trail was established through numbering each of the lines in the transcripts e.g. 75; and providing the participants code e.g. Cath.
- This code was removed within the body of the report to assist in clarity of presentation of the data.
• The pseudonym for the participant is provided in the report along with the origin of the excerpt e.g. (Cath Focus Group).

Example:

75Mary: Powerful, parents didn’t come up and complain to you.

76Rita: They were powerful. I can remember getting into trouble over something I hadn’t done and I was really upset ‘cos I was little miss goody two shoes, and I can remember going home and saying to my mum and she said Oh well it makes up for the time that you were not caught for doing whatever it was. Um so the teacher was backed 100%, whereas these days it is a very different time, dynamic

82All: chuckle in agreement.

83Rita: Whereas these days, how dare we give a dirty look to our little darling who wouldn’t dare do anything wrong so yeah. So finding those common threads are interesting because coming from a different background.

86Mary: The other thing that we had was that our classes were 40 to 45 children and the teachers had no option but to stand at the front and put you in desks because they couldn’t handle you any other way. I guess I certainly don’t want to teach like that and we are lucky that we don’t have to, you know have conditions are still not good but they’re certainly not like when I was at school.

91Rita: Just onto that a colleague of mine brought in her grade 3/4 photo and out it on the staffroom and we countered there were 54 children in her 3/4 grade.
Author/s:
Nixon, Margaret

Title:
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Date:
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