EXPLORING ATTACHMENT BONDS BETWEEN KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS: A CREATIVE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

This dissertation is a Creative Appreciative Inquiry research study that explores attachment bonds created between kindergarten students and educators. Rooted in the theoretical contexts of Attachment Theory and Social Constructivism, this study highlights the positive elements that contribute to the reciprocal relational connections educators and students offer one another that creates an environment that feels safe for children to thrive. Two research questions were the basis for exploring the topic of educator-child attachment: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers?; and (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in their students while they are away from their caregivers? The Appreciative Inquiry methodology that was utilized in this research connected all participants with the researcher on a deep level; valuing participants' expertise in their own experiences and seeing the need to rise to the challenge of hearing the voices of everyone involved. A kindergarten classroom in Northern Ontario was the site of data collection where two educators (the classroom teacher and Early Childhood Educator), 12 kindergarten students, and five caregivers participated in two cycles of the 4D model in Appreciative Inquiry. Methods included classroom observations (6), semi-structured interviews with the education team (3), student classroom brainstorming sessions (2), student draw-and-tell exercises (2), and semi-structured interviews with caregivers (6). Analysis of the data was carried out using a reflexive thematic analysis and was assisted by NVivo software. Results of the study generated four themes that connected to the topic of research and contributed to answering the research questions: physical proximity, touch, attend/attune/accept, and presentation. *Exploring Attachment Bonds Between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A*

Creative Appreciative Inquiry adds to the current body of literature by offering a new methodological approach in raising the voices of students and their educators to the fore of the topic discourse while also highlighting new considerations for building educator-child relationships that have not yet been cited in literature.

Keywords: Attachment; children in research; educator-child relationships; Appreciative Inquiry; arts-informed

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The participants in this research belong to various groups, all of whom deserve their own acknowledgement. To the teacher and Early Childhood Educator, who were participants but also my research partners. Your willingness to participate, showing both vulnerability in being seen and your openness to allowing me into your classroom with the shadows of COVID-19 still very much looming across the education sector made this experience enjoyable and fruitful. To the parents of the kindergarten student participants, the trust you offered me to work with your children while completing this process was invaluable to the success of this research. As for the

kindergarten students, your voices were heard loud and clear. You truly were the leaders of this study and the knowledge you offered to share with me was invaluable. I only hope I have been able to share that knowledge, those amazing voices, in a manner here that is just.

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Lastly, to my family. None of us knew, truly, how impactful this journey would be on us. Now, looking back, we can recall times we were stressed, tired, separated, distant, and unsure. But, when I think about the time it has taken to complete this process, I will not remember times of stress, but times of resilience. Not us being tired, but of what kept us energized. I will recall times we found to be together, that made us feel connected. This endeavour was not mine alone but included all of us. Of course, my children were a large part of this, but it was my partner, Lindsay, that ensured the bad never outweighed the good. Lindsay, you have been my biggest champion. This is just as much your work as it is mine. Without you, I would have never started this journey, let alone see it to its end. Lindsay, you are everything to me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

The PhD experience is many things to many people. For me, one offering it has provided is an opportunity to reflect on the most influential moments that have guided me to studying attachment as it connects to children entering the formal education system. In this first chapter, I present my path towards the research questions explored in my dissertation. Reflecting on past experiences that begin with memories from when I was a kindergarten student myself, I offer musings to ground the reader in a more complex understanding on the topic of educators and kindergarten students' emotional bonds; an understanding that is not void of subjective interpretations but, instead, displays the topic through the worldview that I own. Detailing my journey to building the questions I desired to research, and the methodology selected to do so, the below chapter places me and my experiences as the foundation in building this dissertation.

My time in kindergarten is well in the past now, yet fond memories still remain vibrant and vivid in my mind. One particular memory I hold dear is connected to the unstructured times, when the other classmates and I would disperse around the classroom to engage in an activity of choice. Some children would rush to the limited number of paint-covered smocks by the in-class sink to guarantee their place at the painting station. Others would circle around the small bookshelf in the centre of the classroom, looking at their favourite book. Although I would sometimes attend these areas in the classroom, my free time was usually spent at the shelves underneath the windows of the classroom that housed a large plastic bin full of building blocks. My friends and I would build many things with the blocks, but what we built most often were robot figurines. We would begin each building session by divvying up the blocks, one by one, hoping to get the blocks that would be best for building our figure. My friends and I spent what must have accumulated to hours building the robots, breaking them down, and then building

them all over again until we felt we had designed the perfect figurine. Now, there is a trick to making the perfect robot out of building blocks. It is not getting the most blocks, nor is it ensuring all the blocks are of the same colour. No, the secret to making the best building block robot is to start with a large, flat, rather dull, foundation piece that your robot can stand on. Without that piece, the robot is shaky and topples every time there is a strong breeze or someone stomps as they walk by. But, begin with a foundation piece, and the robot is strong, can be added to, and you have the freedom to make the robot the way you envision.

The metaphor of a building blocks structure speaks to how I see the creation and evolution of my ever-growing theoretical paradigm that has led me to my interests in childhood attachment and how children build relationships with adults who are not their primary caregiver. The way I interact with the world, how I know it to be, is and will forever be grounded in my history and current cultural and social context (Martinez-Brawley, 2020). Those who interact with this work I present, therefore, must first be offered a brief description of who I am beyond my identity as a researcher. I wish for readers to understand my research through, at least in part, understanding who I am.

I have three children. Like most children (Hertz et al., 2019), their first introduction into the formal education system came when they entered kindergarten. Similarly, like many caregivers (Bérubé et al., 2018), at times this was difficult for me to work through emotionally. Our family's experiences with the education system were, and continue to be, quite positive. However, children spending less time with their primary caregivers is often accompanied by a sense of worry and fear of the unknown (Bérubé et al., 2018). There is a lot of trust that caregivers offer to educators (LaRosa et al., 2023). Trust that our children will be safe in the school environment. Trust that the educators will care for our children and teach them in ways

that builds upon what we have worked so hard in cultivating over the first years of their lives. My experiences with my own children transitioning to the formal education system piqued my curiosity. How do we create an environment where children can feel safe and cared for while away from the carers they have known to be their primary figures of safety for their entire lives?

It is appropriate at this point in my musings of being a parent that I also note the second identity I own that highly influences the direction I have chosen to take in my PhD research. I am a social worker. Particularly, across my career I spent a large portion of my practice working in the children's mental health sector providing therapeutic services and interventions within classrooms where children were demonstrating maladaptive behaviours. Therefore, just as I had experiences with my own children in the kindergarten setting, I observed and interacted with many families, all with their own stories that detailed unique experiences of children entering the formal education system. As a social worker, my experiences in practice were highly skewed towards interacting with those most vulnerable to negative experiences while going through transitional periods in life, such as a child starting school (Roets et al., 2015). Children particularly are at greater risk to experience adverse life events that may specifically influence their ability to form secure attachments (Choi et al., 2020). As I worked alongside the education teams in various schools, I began to wonder if many of the maladaptive behaviours that the children were demonstrating were attachment related (as other researchers have noted; Maguire et al., 2015) and, if so, what can educators do to have children feel safer and cared for while at school?

Part of being a social worker means that my ability to critically self-reflect has been fostered throughout my education (Pillay et al., 2018) and practice (Asakura et al., 2018). However, it was not until I entered into the PhD program at Nipissing University where this

ability to reflect was challenged through the prospect of engaging in research and the level of impact I would have in bringing myself into that research. Just as I offer a piece of myself, highlighting my identities as a father and social worker, the theories presented here are, too, a part of who I am and influence this newer identity I have cultivated during my time at Nipissing. The identity of researcher.

Theoretical Framework

Attachment Theory

Considering the theoretical base from which the research topic has evolved, the building blocks metaphor continues to be apt. The visual of literally *attaching* pieces together to build something that is an intricate display of the sum of the parts parallels how attachment is built within all of us. Attachment, as the theory proposes, is formed through the multitude of experiences a child has with a caregiver (Morison et al., 2020). Much like building a structure block by block, a child forms an emotional connection with a caregiver, experience by experience (Lewis, 2018). Throughout my years of practicing social work, the idea of creating experiences in a child's life to provide messages of safety and being cared for seemed logical to me. In my work with primary caregivers, I partnered with the families I worked with to explore past experiences to which a child was exposed and made linkages from those experiences to how the child interacted with the world. This premise of a child absorbing both explicit and implicit messages from caregivers to (on a subconscious level) interpret their place in the world is a cornerstone to attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and is the foundation for John Bowlby's (1969) concept of the Internal Working Model (IWM).

As a new researcher, but also a father, I connect with Bowlby and Ainsworth's seminal work on attachment. Ideas of responding to child needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and those

responses informing the child as to how to view the world, including how they see themselves in it (Bowlby, 1969), resonate with me and things I have tried to be mindful of as I care for my children. However, it is more contemporary attachment views offered by today's researchers that have been most influential on how I make sense of children being emotionally connected to caregivers. As a male who cares for children, Bowlby's influence on the discourse of "mothering" women (Símonardóttir, 2016, p. 110) is disconnected from my own experiences. Caring for children does not need to be the primary directive of women and caregivers who are male are also capable of creating emotional bonds with their children connects with my own view of caring (Lotz et al., 2021). What is also important to me is the recognition that attachment is built together, carer and child, and needs both persons to actively and continuously engage in building the relationship (Page, 2017). Bowlby himself saw this to be true and more recent attachment research has highlighted the reciprocal nature of attachment building (Harlow, 2021) and pulls attachment theory towards an understanding of emotional connections being socially constructed (Dastpak et al., 2017).

Social Constructivist Theory

Reflecting on my own time as a kindergarten student, time would speed by as my friends and I worked parallel to one another, building our robots out of blocks. When I was finally finished, I would raise my hand and yell, with great pride, for my teacher to come and look at my remarkable creation. As I waited for what felt like an eternity to pass for the teacher to slowly make her way to our station, my friends' robots would always capture my intrigue. Eventually, my teacher would finally reach our table.

"Why do you have wheels on the front of your robot?" she asked during one interaction.

"Because, this way my robot can stand and fight but it can also get away quickly!" I responded. My teacher seemed amused, and I was proud. She then began ruffling through the box of building blocks and eventually pulled out two triangle shaped pieces.

"Do you think these wings might help?" she asked. "Maybe your robot could fly faster than it can drive." In that moment, I was in awe of my teacher's brilliance. Exchanging the wheels for wings would make this the best robot yet!

The idea of me learning from my teacher, being able to adapt my own creation based on the knowledge I gained through our interaction, exemplifies the notion that what is known is, in many ways, defined and constructed within the social realm (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). The concept of knowledge building, how we learn, is connected to the social interactions we experience. This is true, too, with how we learn what is safe, who cares for us, and how the emotional bonds we form with others influence our future connections (Lewis, 2019). Attachment Theory, as Bowlby (1969) first offered it, was situated in a more humanist perspective (Aslanian, 2018). The child seeks to emotionally connect to the caregiver because of a biological need to be close to their provider and protector. As the understanding of attachment evolved however, researchers highlighted the complexity of human relationships and posited that emotional connections between caregiver and child are built through a reciprocal exchange of messages (Psychogiou et al., 2018).

Through my time as a practicing social worker, I witnessed this phenomenon almost daily. From moments I spent with a caregiver and their child in a therapy session to observing a teacher interact with a child, I could see the messages offered from both parties in the exchange to building on their current knowledge of that particular relationship. From the words that were used to the way and tone those words were delivered (i.e., the unspoken messages that

accompanied the words), every part of every interaction was being accepted, analyzed, and internalized to add to what each person *knew* about that relationship. It was, and is, fascinating to me.

Knowledge being understood through a social context was best encapsulated by Lev Vygotsky's (1978) work on Social Constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Relationships and emotional connections are at times portrayed as secondary concepts for social constructivism theorists; instead being characterized as a dividend of cognitive readiness for children to learn in a scholastic sense (Eun, 2018). Indeed, social constructivism has been criticized by some researchers as being reductionist when considering complex concepts such as morality, culture, and forming relationships (Lewis, 2019). However, many social constructivism theorists see relationship as central to any learning and development in children (Lewis, 2019). From my own experiences, I have been able to watch my children learn and grow with me, including the growth of our relationships. How do we communicate with one another? How do we feel about each other? Answers to these questions are evidenced through constant and reciprocal exchanges between a child and caregiver (Eun, 2019).

Attaching to a Constructed Paradigm

Interpersonal relationships, such as the ones I saw and supported while practicing social work, are constructs. They are two entities connecting to forge a relationship that is complementary. So too, are the relationships between theoretical concepts, such as pairing attachment concepts with social constructivism views. Although peering through different lenses, both Bowlby (1969) and Vygotsky (1978) were interested in exploring what factors contribute to child development. Broad social constructivist concepts of learning, constructing reality, and language can be understood to be present when considering *learning* between caregiver and

child, *constructing* their attachment to each other, and the *language* (both verbal and nonverbal) they use to define their *reality* with their relationship.

Although social constructivism has been often framed in a context of learning and cognitive development in children, Verissimo et al., (2017) calls attention to the optimal environment for this to occur being one that fosters feelings of care and safety. This safe learning environment results in both child and caregiver co-constructing and defining what is safe to them (Verissimo et al., 2017). Here is where I see attachment and social constructivism being inextricably connected. To learn, one must feel safe and cared for. But, to feel safe and cared for, one must learn how feeling safe and cared for looks and feels. Learning and attachment are interconnected; attachment cannot be reduced to learning, nor learning to attachment (Granqvist, 2021).

And so, this is my foundation piece. It is where my PhD research is situated. However, as I started down this long journey towards a doctoral degree, I understood that my research needed to be rooted in who I am, but then would grow into a presentation of others' stories. It is their experiences, the participants' voices, that would move this research and make it something that adds to the discourse on Nipissing University's PhD focus of educational sustainability.

A View to Sustain

My motivation to add to the conversations on educational sustainability are, too, founded on who I am and the identities I previously explored above. Social work values are grounded in a just and sustainable future for all people (Wang & Altanbulag, 2022). Social sustainability is a key focus in social work education (Kloppenburg et al., 2018) and practice (Wang & Altanbulag, 2022). With this view of sustainability, in social work practice there is a high prevalence of systems-based approaches (Cash, et al., 2019). Similarly, Sterling (2016) connects sustainable

education with various complex systems that are in constant communication and negotiation with each other, influencing one another as they continuously evolve. A sustainable society includes sustainable education that is future oriented and considered long term implications (Sterling, 2016).

Sterling's (2016) focus on the future also connects to voices of the future, citing that respecting and including students' perspective when working within the topic of educational sustainability is critical. The ways in which I parent my children have not remained static. Reflecting on myself as a newer father, I remember relying on the strategy of telling. Telling my kids what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and so on. However, it was not until I witnessed the dividends of hearing from my children, seeing them make fewer mistakes, being more confident, teaching me, that I truly appreciated the value of including their voices in the process. Including children in exploring and developing sustainable educational practices speaks to me and adds additional perspectives to the conversation (Hirst, 2019).

What is Known of Educator-Child Attachment

The understanding of attachment formation is prevalent in the literature. Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth's (1978) seminal works on attachment provide strong footings for contemporary researchers. Their research continues to offer new researchers a foundation to build from regarding what is known on the topic of educators and kindergarten students forming emotional connections with one another. Embarking on the journey of this research, I first had to gain an appreciation for the contemporary studies that align with the topic and will be informing the direction I choose to take. What building blocks do I have that can help build my research?

Children form their relationships based on messages of safety, care, and support they receive from their caregiver(s) (Verissimo et al., 2017). The term relationship is value neutral. A

person can have a good relationship, bad relationship, or a relationship that is much more complex than a dichotomous categorization can offer. Considering relationship as it forms between child and caregiver, the value of that relationship begins upon first interaction (Pérez, et al., 2017). That is, from the moment a child and caregiver interact (in any form of communication) a relationship begins to be constructed through that interaction. A child who has been offered messages from their caregiver that they are safe and cared for is likely to form a relationship that can be categorized as positive or *secure*: enjoyable exchanges, trust, and desire to be together (Mohd-Zaharim & Hashim, 2022). Alternatively, a child exposed to unsafe environments and not being offered consistent messages of care might struggle to trust their caregiver, avoid exchanges, or have heightened levels of stress, fear, or anger.

Interpretations by the child in relation to the messages being offered by the caregiver informs their relational framework, or Internal Working Model (IWM) (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). With every new interaction, new data is collected by the child that deepens their understanding of how that relationship is defined and what they can expect from future interactions (both in that relationship and others). As Holdaway and Becker (2018) note, children come into the formal education system with a pre-existing IWM. Beginning with the moment a child interacts with an educator (as a person who is now in a position of caring for the child's wellbeing, the educator is also in the role of caregiver), the IWM is being further molded to now include this new relationship (Hertz et al., 2018). Considering the previous notion of value being placed on relationship above, the phenomenon of a new relationship being developed between educator and child is rooted in both the educator's and child's past relationships and how good (secure) or not good (insecure) those relationships were.

This research is focused on the educator-child relationship phenomenon. Particularly, considering both parties have any number of relationships that are informing how they form their new relationship with each other, how does a secure relationship form between them?

Problem and Purpose

Although the literature is rife with studies that explore child caregiver attachment, a particular focus on educator and kindergarten student attachment has been rarely studied (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Attachment, even when concerning primary caregivers and their children, is an intricately complex concept. It is the pairing of two IWMs (the caregiver's and the child's) that interact with one another to constantly change and evolve the definition of the relationship (Speidel et al., 2023). Whether it be a look, a word, an action (or, perhaps, an absence of one or all of these) from the caregiver, the IWM of a child alters to include the new data resulting from each interaction. As time passes, these interactions continue to define and reinforce what the child knows: knows about themself, about their relationship with the caregiver, and how to interact with others.

Introducing another caregiver after a child has been forming their IWM for years through interactions with their primary carer creates an added element of consideration that many researchers have opted not to explore (Pallini et al., 2018). Referring specifically to the attachment formed between educator and student, Pallini et al. (2018) hypothesizes that the lack of literature on the topic can be attributed to the intricately complex nature of the subject. Introducing children to the formal education system (typically this begins via attending kindergarten) also introduces them to another caregiver who acts as their primary person supporting their safety and learning for a comparative amount of time through the day as the

primary caregiver. The level of influence an educator has on a child's IWM cannot be understated but continues to be so in the literature (Pérez et al., 2017).

As noted, the research on educators and kindergarten students is sparse in the literature, but what is even rarer are studies that include the voice of child participants. As White (2016) notes, most literature on the topic of teacher-child relationships continues to be focused primarily on the teacher perspective. However, recent studies have highlighted a need for including children as more than observable objects in data collection and call for students to be active participants in the research. Indeed, valuing children's voices in research has been the topic of discourse for many who wish to explore topics pertaining to young people. As Jørgensen (2019) notes, the conversations have been growing following the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC) compelled those studying topics connected to children to increase their participation in those studies. Unfortunately, many studies continue to devalue the child perspective and so their voices are left unexplored (Wastell & Degotardi, 2018).

To note, one hurdle that seems to act as a barrier to actively engaging children in research is the developmentalist position many researchers continue to take in their studies (Wall et al., 2019). This stance some researchers hold is one that espouses that adults are the authoritative figure that must lead and direct children who are too immature or cognitively incapable of offering any meaningful contribution to the research. Research that operates under a narrow view of how data can be collected (that is, the more traditional methods of semi-structured interviews and surveys) is limited in its ability to capture and share the perspective of the child. Instead, research that engages child participants can benefit from utilizing multiple ways of data collection, specifically including creative means such as incorporating arts exercises (Botsoglou et al., 2019). Using creative data collection methods continues to be rare in the literature and has

yet to be utilized in research that explores attachment bonds between educators and their kindergarten students.

Research Questions

Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry investigates the phenomenon of relationship building between children and their teaching team in the formal education system. Particularly, I was interested in studying this topic through a unique lens; a lens that would highlight the child perspective. Considering the above, this research investigated two key questions: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers?; and (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while they are away from their caregivers?

Methodology

As I narrowed my vision on what I wanted to explore in this dissertation, becoming more focused on the particular topic of interest, the importance of building a methodology that would allow me the opportunity to build the research I desired became ever more understood. Just as when I was building robot figurines many years ago, it was not enough to simply grab any piece, any methodological perspective, and fit it together with others to see my vision come through. I know now, just as I knew then, that the vision can only be realized if there is an alignment and connection with the pieces selected to complete the task.

In constructing this study, there were two specific considerations I desired to explore. First, bringing kindergarten student voice front and centre to the research was needed. Second, seeing what the educators are doing that aids in the positive relationship building process was an

important component for me in this research. Beginning with the latter, to understand how relationships are formed and maintained, we must not only consider gaps or missteps, but also what is working well (Munz & Wilson, 2017). As a social worker, I am held to a standard of practice that compels a wholistic view; considering not merely missing pieces or pieces that are adversely working against a goal, but also considers pieces that work towards protecting or improving positives (OCSWSSW, 2023). Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a methodological framework holds similar strength-based values as a social worker's practice standards and so spoke to me as a path this research could take to highlight many of the things educators do that supports a child's feeling of safety and care while away from their primary caregiver. As Gray et al. (2019) note, AI, as a research methodology, values participants' experiences and expertise by promoting their active participation in research and focuses on strengths exhibited throughout the study.

Holding educators' strengths in building positive relationships with kindergarten students in high regard, it was important for me to explore multiple pathways, from multiple vantage points, to highlight those abilities. Thus, the children's perspective of factors that contribute to them feeling safe and cared for was, for me, paramount in furthering our understanding of how attachment is formed within the educator-child relationship. Securing the child perspective in research, as noted above, is best done by deploying multiple methods of data collection and particularly those that are creative and employing artistic methods. By utilizing both traditional methods of data collection while informing the research through artistic and creative means, I hope to "illuminate" the children's perspective and the study (Bolden, 2017). Informing this research through arts-based methods was central to the methodological design of the study and bolsters the more traditional qualitative inquiry of Appreciative Inquiry (as a methodology with

parallel tenets as Participatory Action Research) with Arts-Informed Research (Cole & Knowles, 2008).

Conclusion

I hold such fond memories of my days in kindergarten. Rushing towards the building blocks station, excited to build my next, best, robot so that I could share it with my friends and teacher gave me such joy. A slight grin is unavoidable for me as I recall that moment in time. The chapter of my life as a PhD student is now at its end, and I find myself feeling that same smile come over me. The building blocks of this dissertation are all present. My theoretical paradigm acts as the strong base for which my research is built upon. Digging through the literature just as I did in the bucket of building blocks as a child has offered me a knowledge of how this topic has been broached in past research while also offering a window to see what more is needed; what more I can offer through this endeavour. Finally, reflecting on how this research was delivered, the methodology that put the pieces together, is an offering of how this study, this robot of research, was constructed.

In the coming chapters, this dissertation will move through my experiences of completing my PhD study *Exploring Attachment Bonds Between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry*. The journey continues with a comprehensive literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This research endeavour explored the topic of attachment forming and growing between kindergarten students and their educators. The literature that explores this topic covers many key elements that aid in the building of emotional bonds between children and their teacher and Early Childhood Educator (the education team). Yet, gaps remain in the literature, allowing space for continued exploration on the topic. This chapter thoroughly explores the topic of educator-child attachment bonds. Beginning with the theoretical foundation for this study, Chapter 2 will provide a detailed review of attachment theory and social constructivism. Seminal works of both philosophical concepts will be offered before moving across the evolution of each theory to also offer the reader accounts of contemporary framings of attachment and social constructivism. Throughout the detailed review of theories that guided this research, attachment and social constructivism will be seamed together, highlighting parallels and elements of synergy between the two concepts that have come together to create my own philosophical paradigm.

Following the theory review, this chapter will explore the topic of the study: the emotional relationships that are formed between educators and kindergarten students. The exploration is thorough in its examination of the current knowledge offered in the literature by connecting to particular elements of the research topic, illustrating how those elements informed the current study, and highlighting gaps in the literature that makes way for this research to contribute to the knowledge landscape. At the end of the topic review, particular attention will be given to connecting the research topic to educational sustainability to consider how the study might also add to the discourse of building educational practice for future generations. The chapter will conclude by linking the topic, and research questions, to the methodological approach taken in this research, bridging what is currently known in the literature to what, and how, this study adds

through the methodology and methods selected. A more robust review of methodology and methods is offered in Chapter 3: Methodology.

Attachment

Seminal Foundations

John Bowlby's *Attachment and Loss* (1969) book explores the concept of emotional bonds, particularly those formed between children and their caregivers, and the impact those bonds have on children's abilities to learn, play, and develop in the social world. Bowlby's work was groundbreaking at the time of its release and continues to be one of the leading relational theories that crosses disciplines (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). Bowlby's work on biological parent/child attachment bonds emphasises the primary connection between a mother and child. As Bowlby understood it, the emotional bond between parent and child grounds how the child sees themself and how they view and subsequently interact with the outside world. This foundation for a child navigating the social world, and how they define themselves within it, is called an Internal Working Model (IWM) (Bowlby, 1969). The name denotes the intrapersonal uniqueness (Internal) of the model while it continues to be adaptive to constant input (Working) (Bowlby, 1969). In Bowlby's later works, he expands on his understanding of how the IWM is formed, and with whom the bonds are created, recognizing the primary caregiver as the principal influencer in the attachment process (Harlow, 2021). That is, a child that is primarily cared for by someone other than the biological mother is more likely to develop an emotional connection to the primary caregiver than the biological parent, with the child's IWM being formed through the social interactions between them and the caregiver.

Mary Ainsworth, a colleague of Bowlby, is also seen as an influential contributor to the building of attachment theory. The work that she and her colleagues contributed continues to

inform and inspire many academics and practitioners in the fields of education, psychology, and relational pedagogy (Kerns & Hart, 2018). Ainsworth et al. (1978) continued to build on Bowlby's attachment theory by investigating the initial stages of infancy where the IWM first develops. Through their research they note that Bowlby's connection between childhood attachment and cognitive and emotional development in children is interlinked with the caregivers' ability to deliver supportive and appropriate messages in response to children's needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Specifically, Ainsworth et al.'s work highlights ways children demonstrate their caregiver attachment as secure or insecure. Securely attached children demonstrate an ability to self-regulate their emotions, demonstrate trust with caregivers, are able to adapt to novel experiences, and learn through exploring and demonstrated curiosity (Bosmans et al., 2023). In contrast, insecurely attached children demonstrate frequent or intense emotional dysregulation, externalized behavioural concerns, and difficulty in developing and maintaining social relationships (Ritblatt & Longstreth, 2019).

Although future works began to move away from spotlighting the biological component of attachment, Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth's (along with her colleagues; 1978) work, predominately focused on the connection between a mother and child; a connection Bowlby coined the Monotropy theory (Psychogiou et. al, 2018). Monotropy theory suggests that a child's need to feel emotionally connected to their caregiver is innate in nature (Psychogiou et. al, 2018) and is thought to be formed within the first year (Al-Yagon, 2018) or two years (Ritblatt & Longstreth, 2019) of the child's life.

Contemporary Interpretations

Although there continues to be some consensus across scholars regarding the influence attachment has on a child's life, specifically regarding cognitive, emotional, and social

development (Naveed et al., 2020), attachment theory has moved beyond many of Bowlby and Ainsworth's original concepts. Attachment theory began with the monotopic position that an individual (i.e., the child) seeks to satisfy needs (i.e., a sense of safety and care) from one particular individual (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021). Current attachment literature however, contests that the foundational theorists in attachment miss-stepped in placing such high emphasis on the sole connection between the biological parent (typically the mother) and child. Bakermans-Kranenburg notes that Bowlby's monotropy theory cannot account for all factors of social interactions that form additional attachments with non-primary caregivers. Indeed, even Bowlby himself noted that attachment is reciprocal in nature and can develop in multiple relationships through the exchange of consistent messages of safety and care (Harlow, 2021). Yet, to this day, Bowlby's dated view on how attachments are formed, and with whom, continues to influence a discourse of "mothering" women; suggesting women should parent, and should parent well, lest be considered a failure (Símonardóttir, 2016, p. 110).

Beyond the recognition that parenting (a) need not be the primary directive of women and (b) caregivers who are not women can form strong emotion bonds with children in their care (Lotz et al., 2021), contemporary attachment work moves away from the one-sided humanist idea of a child seeking a single parent's love to build on the concept of reciprocity in caregiver/child relationships. Newer research presents attachment as a bond between two people, both of whom engage in a constant exchange of language and messaging that builds their understanding of how that relationship is defined (and, as is noted below, how each person defines themselves within that relationship) (Page, 2017). Considering reciprocal relationships, the discourse in attachment theory is shifting to appreciate that a caregiver/child relationship is one that is built together, allowing for a realization that concepts such as child-centrism (that is, a

caregiver must always be attuned and provide for the needs of the child) is reductionist. Furthermore, this idea of reciprocity in relationship building is true, not simply with the primary caregiver. Children's relationships with all caregivers in their lives are complex and dynamic, continuously developing and defining roles. Closely aligned with cooperative caregiving, or alloparenting, attachments formed between caregivers and child serve to fill the multitude of needs children have at any given time (Granqvist, 2021). Regarding the more specific topic of educator-child attachment, building a wider net of carers of children moves attachment theory discourse well into the arena of formal education, with contemporary attachment theorists identifying the school environment as a place of holistic learning aligned with Noddings' (2018) concepts of ethics of care (Haslip et al., 2019; Page, 2017).

As alluded to above, the IWM can be considered to have two essential parts. The first part is the child's constructed identity of the attachment figure that is created through past interactions with the caregiver. The second part is the reflection and valuing of self that is also defined through caregiver/child messaging (Ştefan & Avram, 2021). These mental representations of the attachment figure and the child are not formed independent of one another; nor do they live in their present state isolated from each other. Instead, the child builds an understanding of who they are, and type of relationship they hold with the caregiver, through expressing needs to the adult and that adult tending to those needs through (as the child interprets) such virtues as being responsive, dependable, and trustworthy (White, 2016). As the number of messages from the caregiver continue to build, the child creates mental representations of their relationship with that person and their position within the broader world (Al-Yagon, 2018). Should the caregiver offer a lack of positive virtues, messages of over-dependence, or inconsistent messaging, a child could develop an IWM that is insecure. This

insecure attachment may result in an IWM that is avoidant (the child pushes away offerings of support and love), ambivalent (the child is unable to internalize messages of support and love), or disorganized (the child is unsure of the messaging and so is unable to trust) (Al-Yagon, 2018). The caregiver that offers consistent messaging that the child interprets as positive however, builds an IWM in the child that identifies their caregiver as dependable and their environment as trustworthy. Continued messages of safety and trust builds toward the child internalizing them, crystalizing notions of themselves as loveable and worthy of others' positive interactions offered toward them (Speidel et al., 2023). Harlow (2021) notes that, when a child has been able to internalize messages of worthiness from others, they will then apply that understanding to future relationships beyond their primary caregiver.

Embedded within the theory of attachment is the concept of emotional regulation; how a person is able to bring balance back to an emotional baseline following a heightened state of affect (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). According to attachment theory, as part of the development of the IWM in interpreting how safe the child is and the trust that is kept between them and the caregiver, early relationships with that caregiver offer the child opportunities to learn how to regulate emotions (Speidel et al., 2023). A relationship between caregiver and child that is defined as supportive (i.e., a safe and comfortable connection between the two) offers a child an environment that minimizes distress (Pallini et al., 2018). Reducing the opportunity for distress, as well as offering a child the opportunity to safely manage and get through times of dysregulation, builds a child's capacity to address future stressful events, even during times away from the caregiver (Ştefan & Avram, 2021). Considering the child's ability to transfer their interpretations of relationships and emotional regulation skills, the IWM is predictive of the child's feelings of safety while at school and away from their primary caregiver.

Connection to the Research Questions

Through this research, I investigated two research questions. First, I was interested in what kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase their feelings of safety and care while away from their primary caregivers. In considering this question, my hope was to offer new insight into building attachments with the teacher and Early Childhood Educator (ECE) in the kindergarten classroom. By exploring what messages are received by a child that, through their own means of expression, they identify as having them feel more cared for and safe with a member of the education team, we can create further meaning in the bonds that are formed between them and their educators. The second question I was concerned with was how kindergarten educators in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in children while they are away from their caregivers. As noted above, contemporary attachment theorists understand relationships that are formed between student and teacher or ECE are reciprocal (Page, 2017). Therefore, studying how teachers and ECEs create and sustain feelings of safety and care (question 2 above) builds our knowledge on how attachments are formed within the school setting.

Social Constructivism

Seminal Foundations

Social constructivism is a theoretical tradition that recognizes truths and realities are not absolute but are constructed through social interaction (Eads, 2023). Formulated by Lev Vygotsky (1978), social constructivism's influence on researchers' and practitioners' understanding of how learning occurs, particularly with children, is widely recognized (Quac & Van, 2023). Vygotsky (1978) posited that a child develops cognitive tools such as language to allow them to navigate the gap between individual needs and having those needs met through

social communication (Ehrich & O'Donovan, 2019). Ehrich and O'Donovan go on to note that Vygotsky understood child development and learning as more than *cognitive readiness* (i.e., physiologically maturing to absorb new input) and included in his definition the complexity of interpersonal transactions of knowledge as children grow and learn.

Of Vygotsky's works, the most well-known contribution to education pedagogy is his formulation of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Eun, 2018). It is through the ZPD, according to Vygotsky, that the gap between need and satisfying that need is mediated through social interaction. As needs are not merely tangible or tactile, the ZPD also (and just as importantly) acts as a metaphorical space for children's cognitive development. Through interactions that are collaborative and reciprocal between a child and others (e.g., caregivers, adults, or peers), children build on past interpersonal experiences to accumulate additional learning (Ehrich & O'Donovan, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978).

Although Vygotsky's work is seen as the foundation of social constructivism, works of other key theorists have also contributed to the formation of this theory. One such theorist was Bruner, whose publication *Actual minds, possible worlds* (1986) was integral in building on the ideological framework set forth by Vygotsky (Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019). Bruner (1986) built on Vygotsky's ZPD to offer the concept of consciousness loaning. Consciousness loaning is the beginning building blocks of knowledge creation; where children borrow knowledge and skills from adults and other skilled individuals to complete tasks or build on their developmental level (Eun, 2018). This process is done through mentoring, collaboration, and observation (Eun, 2019). Bruner noted that children learn primarily through engaging in interpersonal interactions. These interactions offer children opportunities to learn in different ways, exposing them to the various interpretations and truths owned by each person (Barrett, et al., 2017). This

consciousness loaning eventually builds to the children themselves forming their own knowledge and skills that continue to be shared in every interaction, once more building to continuous and unlimited learning and interpretations (Magdalena, 2016). Finally, Bruner also further strengthened Vygotsky's bridge between socialization and culture, noting that there is an interconnectedness between culture and development where both influence one another (Bruner, 1986).

Contemporary Interpretations

Counter-positions to Vygotsky's work have surfaced over recent history. These arguments include his work on the ZPD being identified as being too vague and open for interpretation (Lantolf & Xi, 2019; Newman, 2018) and the social constructivist view of linguistic development being a precursor for moral and cultural development being seen as an oversimplification of the complexities in such concepts (Lewis, 2019; Newman, 2018). In addition, Vygotsky's ideological connection to the development of critical thinking has been described as tenuous (Hằng, 2019; Kivunja, 2014). Social constructivism however, continues to be a highly sourced and influential ideology to this day (Eun, 2018; Ehrich & O'Donovan, 2019; Hằng, 2019). The continued prominence of social constructivism as a cited theoretical foundation for research can be attributed, in part, to contemporary theorists expanding on particular topics of the theory (beyond Vygotsky's and Bruner's original concepts) in an effort to deepen the understanding of the theory, leaving it less open to chances for misinterpretations (Quac & Van, 2023; Vasileva & Balyasnikova, 2019).

As part of the social constructivism theory, Vygotsky presented the idea of learning occurring on a dual-plane within the ZPD (Eun, 2018). The first plane of learning occurs within the social environment, where a child observes and communicates with others within their social

realm and absorbs and interprets the data collected from those exchanges (Nakonechna et al., 2021). As the data is translated and understood by the child, building new knowledge, that knowledge becomes internalized and autonomous within the learner (Nakonechna et al., 2021). In a critique to Vygotsky's dual plane concept, Newman (2018) posits that the presentation of a dichotomous learning process, where a person learns from others to then make that knowledge their own, is reductionist. To Newman, learning (and the display of what is learned in the form of verbal and non-verbal language) will always reside in the social (what Vygotsky called the interpsychological plane) and cannot ever be solely internalized (Vygotsky's intrapsychological plane). Eun (2018) however, understands the ZPD as offering more to the understanding of knowledge creation than the commonly referred to learning through the sharing from the more knowledgeable person to the less knowledgeable (such as how Newman interprets Vygotsky's work). According to the author, learning occurs through both formal instruction and spontaneous activities and that the ZPD never truly closes as learners constantly move from one learning concept to the next. Therefore, no one piece of knowledge ever truly rests within the intrapsychological plane. This position opposes Newman's interpretation that the ZPD ends with knowledge becoming internalized. Dastpak et al., (2017) have a similar interpretation of the ZPD as Eun, highlighting that the ZPD is where learning happens as a result of relationships and that relationships too, learn and grow. This consideration infers that learning does not stop when knowledge crosses into the intrapsychological plane. Instead, the intrapsychological gives back to the social to create new realities: the social and the individual are in constant communication with one another. Lantolf and Xi (2019) expand on Dastpak et al.'s point, noting the individual communicating with the social (and vice versa) is intricate and complex; the interactions being

constant and reciprocal, includes verbal and non-verbal communication, and is highly influenced by variances in the environment.

Noted above, social constructivism has also been questioned on its application regarding the topics of morality and critical thinking development. In viewing such topics through a social constructivist lens, Lewis (2018) notes that a child's development, including their interpretations of the world, is socially constructed and is always mediated by the cultural influences. Morality, then, as part of how a person interacts with the social world, is developed through social and cultural influences (Ehrich & O'Donovan, 2019). Regarding critical thinking, Ehrich and O'Donovan note that social constructivism defines language as the primary psychological tool that promotes higher level cognition. The tool of language, as Hằng (2019) understands it, opens opportunities to create and build on the skill of critical thinking within the social context. Other interpersonal skills, concepts such as mediation, modeling, and, cooperation, can all connect to social learning and the development of knowledge (Hằng, 2019). Learning skills too, such as questioning, inquiry, and considering various explanations of phenomena are built first from engaging with others (within the ZPD) (Magdalena, 2016).

Connection to the Research Question

As with Bowlby (1969), Vygotsky (1978) was interested in exploring what factors contribute to child development. Both theorists also shared in their belief that relationships were the foundation to development (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). Where the two theories differ is through their particular area of focus, as social constructivism is concerned with the broader topics of learning and constructing realities whereas attachment theory is concerned primarily with the development of social abilities, healthy relationships, individual personality development, and emotional regulation skills (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). However, neither theory

rejects the other's overall premise. For instance, Prino et al., (2023) note that for children to be offered the optimal learning environment they must first feel safe to explore new concepts and that learning itself is co-constructed between the caregiver and child. Exploring questions of what children need to gain that sense of safety (question 1 above) and how educators address those needs (question 2) then, is a matter of how the educator and child learn from each other.

Vygotsky (1978) himself recognized the development of knowledge through the interpersonal relied heavily on the deeply personal relationships that are part of each learner's life (Ehrich & O'Donovan, 2019). The understanding that the ZPD relies on quality of relationship is an important consideration in that, as children wade through the ZPD, their learning is dependant on having a caregiver who is caring and safe to expand the child's knowledge of the innerworkings of the world. It is important to note that this knowledge that children build must be understood not merely through a cognitive position, but also regarding affect and includes understandings of the social world and a child's place within it. Therefore, the intrapsychological plane of learning can be considered to include (and influence) a child's Internal Working Model. Considering the above, to investigate attachment bonds between educator and child, one must explore both the messages being exchanged (or, as Vygotsky would frame it, the language being used) and the environment and actions that offer a sense of safety and trust.

Attaching **Social Constructivism**

When engaging in this research, I approached the study through a social constructivist lens, appreciating that relationships, like all things we come to understand and define, are built within the Zone of Proximal Development (Dastpak et al., 2017). Just as attachment is formed through a reciprocal exchange of messages between caregiver and child, there is a reciprocal process that

happens within the ZPD that sees both caregiver and child seeking to understand their relationship with one another; each bringing their individual experiences into defining their social existence with one another which, in turn, continues to define their individual self (Lantolf & Xi, 2019). Learning and attachment are interconnected; attachment cannot be reduced to learning, nor learning to attachment (Granqvist, 2021). The ZPD is where children learn they are safe and cared for and that they can find/make meaning with those with whom they connect while exploring the world. Exploring what kindergarten students see as being helpful in having them feel safe while at school (question 1 above), then, is not an exercise in *finding* ways children feel safe, but rather an exercise in *building* that knowledge with them and having them learn what attachment is to them.

Current Understanding on the Topic of Educator-Child Emotional Bonds

A child's development is a multidimensional process that is more than physical and cognitive growth and includes the broader, perhaps even more complex, developmental systems of affect and building interpersonal relationships (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). Bowlby's work on the IWM and the attachment bonds formed between caregiver and child emphasized that the primary connection between the caregiver and child laid the groundwork for our understanding of how children view themselves as they interact with the outside world through an attachment theoretical lens. Understanding the impact of a child's IWM (based on their historical interactions with their primary caregiver) on their interactions with other persons and environments offers a foundation for considering what the child needs to feel safe and cared for while away from their primary caregiver (Scherzinger-Wettstein, 2018). However, knowing that a child enters different environments, including the school environment, with a developed (or, minimally, a developing) IWM paints an incomplete picture when considering a child's feelings

of trust and security. In fact, Bowlby himself, as noted above, understood monotropy to be inadequate to account for all factors within a child's social interactions. More likely, according to current knowledge on the topic, is that a child has the ability to form additional attachments with adults who are not their primary caregiver (Psychogiou et. al, 2018). Bowlby (1988) began to hypothesize that additional attachments (that is, additional IWM's) can be formed by a child and that they may be able to subconsciously organize their multiple IWM's in a complex fashion as each relationship builds on previous ones (Psychogiou et. al, 2018). This notion made way for the consideration of secondary attachment formulation.

The hierarchy model of attachment, such as what Bowlby hypothesized, was influenced by, and builds on, his earlier concept of monotropy (Al-Yagon, 2018). According to the hierarchy model, the primary IWM the child has formed through interacting with the primary caregiver remains influential in all relationships the child holds, yet the model also recognizes that relationships with other persons (namely those in a caregiving capacity) develop their own unique IWM (Greškovičová & Lisá, 2023). As Pérez et al. (2017) note, secondary attachment formation as understood through the hierarchy model denotes a much more complex attachment system. Young children are able to define each attachment and then organize each IWM in a hierarchically linear fashion; organizing each attachment based on the needs those relationships serve. In this model, the primary attachment is paramount while secondary attachments contribute less to the child's development and interactions with the world (Welsh et al., 2019).

When considering secondary attachment, Bowlby's hierarchy model is not the only concept covering the topic. There have also been studies on a variant iteration of secondary attachment formulation, call the independence schema (Al-Yagon et al., 2016). Like the hierarchy model, the independence schema notes the formation of multiple IWM's. However,

whereas the hierarchy model understands the various attachments being identified as more or less impactful to a child's continuing development (with the attachment between child and primary caregiver being most influential), the independence schema speculates that all attachments impact the child equally; with the attachment to a primary caregiver being no more or less significant (Charalampous et al., 2016). Although, to note, the literature identifies the hierarchy model as the more prominent type of secondary attachment (Al-Yagon, 2018; Charalampous et al., 2016).

The ability of a child to form an emotional bond to adults who are not their primary caregiver has been studied extensively and there has been much discourse in the literature regarding a child's capability to form additional (or, secondary) attachments with other care providers. However, there are other attachment theorists who proclaim attachment is not multiple formations of unique emotional bonds but instead is a single yet malleable phenomenon that continuously incorporates new input that grows a child's understanding of being cared for (Al-Yagon, 2018; Charalampous et al., 2016). Reeves and Le Mare (2017) note that, although similar to the secondary attachment concept of the primary IWM being foundational in a child's development, a child might in fact incorporate additional input into the existing IWM; building on their previous experiences to evolve their attachment base.

Lastly on the topic of attachment formation is an offering on how IMWs present outwardly. Although labeled the *Internal* Working Model, children's behaviours and presentation exhibited externally are directly related to their IWM (Speidel et al., 2023). Kerns and Hart (2018) note that a child's behaviour should always be considered within the understanding of attachment and what the child is attempting to convey within their attachment needs. As a teacher interacts with a child, they are working within the constructed understanding

of the world that the child has developed through the bond that has been created between them and their caregiver(s). Therefore, the way a child engages in learning activities, plays with peers, or socially interacts with the educator, are all impacted by the IWM (Scherzinger-Wettstein, 2018). With a secure base, a child is more likely to produce positive affective and cognitive outcomes while at school (Scherzinger-Wettstein, 2018). This is especially true when the child's understanding of the world, that is their IWM, can be replicated within the school environment. When a child feels supported and cared for they are able to offer their full self to exploring and learning new concepts, directly impacting their school success (Bosmans et al., 2023).

Connection to the Research

In considering attachment formulation in children, the emotional connection formed between child and primary caregiver is key (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). However, as a child grows and is introduced to new relationships with adults (Al-Yagon, 2018) and peers (Charalampous et al., 2016) their attachment that was previously formed almost entirely through interactions with a primary caregiver is inevitably impacted. Considering this, when researching relationships that are formed between a child and their educators, two important factors must be taken into account. First, young children entering kindergarten will have already formed a foundational IWM that will directly influence their unique needs to feel safe and cared for while away from their primary caregiver. Bademci et al., (2020) note that a child who has formed a secure attachment to their primary caregiver is more likely to describe a positive experience in transitioning to kindergarten and in developing a positive and supportive relationship with their teacher.

Second, that while the primary attachment is highly indicative of the relationship to be formed between a kindergarten student and their educator, the educator-child relationship will

formulate new pathways in the child that either adds to or redefines their pre-existing attachment base (i.e., the hierarchy model) (Al-Yagon, 2018). As noted above, how the child's IWM is influenced by others can be viewed from multiple positions. For instance, the independence schema, that is, the belief that children develop multiple IWMs, all independent of the others and specific to particular relationships, has also been considered in the literature. Vu (2015) offers a clear separation between the IWM developed between child and primary caregiver and the one that develops a bond between student and educator. Verissimo et al. (2017) too, brings into question the hierarchy model of secondary attachment, noting that although the primary IWM has influence on secondary attachments, there is not enough empirical evidence to allow a determination of whether contributions from each relationship to IWMs is equivalent to (or perhaps at times even greater than) that of the primary attachment. Finally, Al-Yagon (2018) found that a child's primary IWM adapts to new input and so will pivot away from its initial presentation, supporting the integration model of attachment (more on the integration model of attachment below).

Although investigating the various interpretations of how secondary attachment is formed is beyond the scope of this research, for the purpose of this study, and to better understand how a child grows to feel safe and cared for in the school system, an appreciation of the various views on secondary attachment is needed. Included in this appreciation, is an understanding that IWMs are in all of us. And so, while a heavier focus is typically placed on the child's IWM as it relates to caregiver-child attachment, the caregiver, too, has their own IWM that is being informed and evolved by the interactions with the child (Speidel et al., 2023). However, there are additional considerations that can contribute to the discourse of this research topic that go beyond the various understandings of the foundations in secondary attachment formation. Indeed, as Speidel

et al. note, there is a greater need for empirical investigations that focus on a) primary and secondary attachments both contributing to educator-child attachment development and b) school-based attachment research that includes person-centred approaches to various understandings (that is, beyond the educators) that highlight the building of emotional bonds. Speidel et al.'s position on utilizing voices within the topic of student-teacher attachment directly connects to the broader issue of educational sustainability (the discipline of Nipissing University's PhD Program). The connection of bringing in additional voices to this research and educational sustainability is fulsomely reviewed below.

Knowledge Gap

Appreciative Inquiry (AI), the methodological direction followed for this research, is a strengths-based approach rooted in positive psychology (Brunzell et al., 2019). Following the positive framing of this methodology (for more detail on the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, please see Chapter 3: Methodology), I was less interested in exposing gaps within the environment of study as I was wanting to uncover positive elements within the research topic of educator-child attachment that might not yet be apparent. This exercise in highlighting the positive attributes of a topic of study is juxtaposed to the more common orientation to research that seeks out failings or gaps (Grieten et al., 2018). It is my hope that this research brings about a redefinition for those that review this work; understanding gaps and limitations identified by this work, including the gaps in what is currently known in the literature that are highlighted below, as strengths and possibilities in need of uncovering and amplification.

Attachment theory suggests that human development, including social, emotional, and cognitive growth builds from the relationships we form with one another (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). Bowlby's (1969) seminal work on attachment theory highlights that the connection

between child and primary caregiver develops a framework for how the child views and navigates the world. The term *primary caregiver*, it should be noted, is not synonymous with *parent*, the latter may be interpreted as or aligned with biological connection. Although Bowlby and Ainsworth et al. (1978) were focused heavily on biological parents, contemporary attachment researchers have expanded well beyond this narrow scope to include non-biological persons in a caregiving role. As Sempowicz et al. (2017) note, the term caregiver can be understood as the person who is responsible for the day-to-day safety and care of the child and does not necessarily include biological connections or legal authority. Examples of primary caregiving include biological parent(s), adoptive parent(s), foster parent(s), biological grandparent(s), social workers, and more.

Of particular importance in forming the relational framework a child develops, that is the forming of the IWM, are the responses offered by caregivers to children's cues (e.g., crying, laughter, physical gestures) (Vasquez & Miller, 2018). Children look to their caregivers for messages of safety, support, and care (Speidel et al., 2023). These messages of safety and care directly influence the creation of the IWM that informs children's abilities to regulate emotions, explore new environments, and learn new skills (Bowlby, 1988; Bademci et al., 2020). Reeves and Le Mare (2017) note that, although IWM's are formed through the interaction between child and primary caregiver, they are not rigid and fixed but instead are flexible and adaptable to added input a child receives through social interactions. This malleability of IWM's moves beyond Bowlby's initial work and could be an indication of either a more open integration model of attachment (when the IWM adapts and grows with each new social exchange [Al-Yagon, 2018]) or an ability of children to form additional attachments, separate from the initial and

primary IWM (Verissimo et al., 2017). Bowlby (1969) identified the latter as secondary attachments.

To recognize that children's attachment is either influenced by new relationships (integration) or that new attachments are formed by those relationships (secondary) highlights the impact those who are not primary caregivers have on child development. This research explored the particular influence the education team had on children's feelings of safety and care as they situate themselves within the formal education system as new kindergarten students. Specifically, this research uniquely addressed two key opportunities (gaps) provided in current empirical knowledge: (a) accessing and giving prominence to children's voices on the topic of attachment and (b) bridging an Appreciative Inquiry methodology with Arts-Informed research to build a Creative Appreciative Inquiry on the topic of attachment.

The literature highlights that more research on educator-student relationships is needed (Bosmans et al., 2023) and, particularly research that is conducted in the classroom that explores students forming attachment with their education team (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). In part, the lack of empirical study regarding this topic could be due to educator-kindergarten student attachment being a complex and fluid concept that is based on the accumulated moments of contact the teacher and child share with one another (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Pallini et al., 2018). Each moment shared by the teacher and/or the ECE builds on the pre-existing IWM(s) the child owns, influencing their cognitive and emotional development as well as their behavioural responses to the environment (Speidel et al., 2023). This research was entered into with an appreciation of the fluidity of relationship building with hopes of discovering a multitude of positive components in the educator-child relationship that make way for kindergarten students to feel safe and cared for while away from their primary attachment figure. This was done, in

part, through connecting to the particularly important task of highlighting children's voices in the research. As Jørgensen (2019) notes, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC) has propelled the increase in child participation in research. However, most literature on the topic of teacher-child relationships continues to be focused primarily on the teacher perspective (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). Using the arts for the purpose of promoting the child voice on the topic offered even greater originality to the study.

Discovering the positives within the educator-child dynamic is uniquely challenging from an empirical research perspective. As Bosmans et al., (2023) note, the connection a teacher and student are able to form holds some reliance on the attachment that is already created between child and primary caregiver prior to the student entering into the formal education system. Teachers have noted that they find it more challenging to connect with students who are presenting with insecure attachment (Brunzell et al., 2019). In other words, students entering into the formal education system that have preexisting negative IWMs that were developed through poor or confusing primary caregiver responses to the children's needs may pose added difficulty for the educators to address the needs of safety and care the students are presenting (Al-Yagon, 2018). As Bosmans et al. calls for, there is a need for additional empirical exploration on how these relationships are formed despite the added challenges that may be presenting.

In exploring the relationships that are built between kindergarten students and their education team, I endeavoured to offer a unique direction for the research. While highlighting the dearth of literature on the subject, Murray et al., (2016) note that researching student-educator connections must move beyond general investigatory work to consider (a) multiple perspectives and voices and (b) building a new future that provides greater room and opportunity for relationships to grow between educator and pupil. Considering (a), this research provided an

opportunity to garner understandings of educator-child attachment through combining the perspectives of educators, primary caregivers, and most importantly the children. For (b), it was clear to me that an action research methodology held the potential to innovate and transform current practice (Grieten et al., 2018) by valuing those multiple perspectives in active research participation.

As noted above, AI is grounded upon the exploration and building of an organization's positive elements in an effort to transform the environment and circumstances in the particular research area so that all persons within it may benefit (Martyn et. al, 2019; Reed, 2006). The participatory nature of AI moves away from more traditional research methodologies to work with research participants, not to retrieve or find information, but to generate and make new information together (Reed, 2006). Therefore, applying an AI framework to this research offers the potential to highlight new ways for teachers and kindergarten students to see and understand their relationships with each other. By opening up an opportunity for multiple perspectives and voices to be heard, the AI process offers new knowledge creation, with the hopes of leading to a new future for the participants of the study as well as those who engage with the dissemination of the completed research (Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018).

Adding multiple perspectives to the research topic is a step towards furthering our understanding of educator-child attachment. In addition to this, considering *what* this research intended to highlight to build on current knowledge (that is, utilizing multiple perspectives in uncovering positive elements that build towards educator-child attachment), it is important to also pay attention to *how* that data captured those multiple viewpoints (Wall, 2017). Butschi et al., (2021) call attention to the need to add children's voices to gain a better understanding of the impacts schooling has on them. Indeed, the literature has many examples of children as

participants in research. Yet, a unique direction in research to advance knowledge through a combination of the participatory elements of AI, including and valuing young children as social agents that are an integral part of all aspects of the research process (Bodén, 2021), and broader, more creative, platforms to collect data and build new knowledge has yet to be utilized in exploring the topic of this research. Cooperrider, one of the creators of AI, along with his colleagues Whitney and Stavros note that "once a person starts drawing or making things they open up to new possibilities of discovery" (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 2946). Although Cooperrider and colleagues' statement was perhaps posed in a metaphorical sense, I believed there was value in considering "drawing" and "making things" when investigating how this research could capture participants' voices in data collection. There are some examples of art being utilized in AI (Bolden, 2017; Reed, 2006), yet these examples are rare in the literature. This study combined AI with an arts-informed approach to offer new ways for including multiple perspectives on the topic and so to advance the current understandings of educator-child attachment.

Investigating and discovering the positives in how education teams are able to provide messages (both verbal and non-verbal) to aid in kindergarten students' ability to feel secure in their transition into the formal education system adds to the knowledge of the academy and also offers new understanding for all those who engage with these findings of this research (children, caregivers, educators, and so on).

Educational Sustainability

Advancing educational practice is a highly complex concept with multiple factors that are in constant interaction with one another (Mohamed, 2016). Yet some of these connected factors, namely student wellbeing and mental health, are often not considered when looking at advancing

academic and scholarly practice in the education system (Evan & Quast, 2017). This research is in keeping with Nipissing University's broader topic of focus for the PhD program: Educational Sustainability. Exploring the attachments that are formed between kindergarten students and their education team offers new understanding of sustainable educational practice through uncovering the positive elements of the teacher-child relationship, particularly through the voice of the children (Hirst, 2019).

Bringing in the student perspective is critical when developing educational practices that will be sustainable in the future (Sterling, 2016). As Hirst (2019) notes, the opportunity for a child to engage with new concepts includes connecting with them in the conversation on sustainable educational practices. Appreciating that adding children's voices was a needed element in exploring both their needs in feeling safe and cared for at school and to contribute to educational sustainability, when looking at contrasting the methodology for this study, I also needed to be aware that a child's IWM also impacts their willingness and ability to actively engage in research. Bosmans et al., 2023 note that children are more confident in exploring novel ideas and actions when their IWM is considered to be grounded in a secure attachment base. Acknowledging the high level of influence secondary attachment figures hold while interacting with children away from their primary attachment figure, it was vital to the success of this research that I also did not rely solely on the voice of the children. Instead, the children's voices was brought to the fore in this study through utilizing their emotional connections with both primary caregivers and the education team (more on the methodology of this research in Chapter 3). In doing so, this research offers new insight into practices that directly impact kindergarten students' social and emotional wellbeing while entering into the formal education system.

This new insight also has impacts on future practice. Placing this study and the impact its addition to empirical knowledge has within the context of education that is sustainable, Sterling (2016) notes that sustainable education must be future-oriented, with a direction to better present-day educational practice while also considering long-term implications of policy and practice). The notion of building toward a stronger future aligns well with the AI framework. As Grieten et al. (2018) recognizes, AI is a generative scholarship practice; intending "not to mirror yesterday's world for purposes of prediction and control, but instead to challenge the status quo, and open the world to new possibilities for collective action" (p. 101).

Huang et. al (2018) note that educators are responsible for setting the overall tone within the classroom. This includes creating a supportive learning environment, motivating and engaging students, establishing relationships, and serving as positive role models for prosocial behaviors (Huang et. al, 2018). Not only is establishing a strong and nurturing relationship with students crucial for the students' immediate success (Holdaway & Becker, 2018), building a secure attachment with a member of their education team can create lasting psychological, social, and behavioural benefits and increase academic achievement while protecting against future academic struggles (Huang et. al, 2018; Scherzinger & Wettstein, 2018). This study uncovers and amplifies the strengths and possibilities that educators possess in building connection with their kindergarten students to not only add to our understanding of how those connections are formed and maintained, but it also adds to the literature in sustainable educational practice.

Gaps and Limitations

As noted above, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based approach (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). As such, this research was less concerned with targeting

gaps and limitations of previous research and instead looked to discover the positive elements within the topic of educator-child attachment that might not yet be apparent (Grieten et al., 2018).

With my preliminary literature review as a basis, this research offered me the opportunity (i.e., the gap) to engage the study topic while including children's voices within attachment research in a school setting. As Murray et al. (2016) note, there is an opportunity for attachment research to bring multiple and new voices to the forefront. Current literature targets primarily the educators' perspective on connecting with their students (Verissimo, 2017). For this research, two additional voices were uncovered and promoted; primary caregivers and (most importantly) children. The literature indicates some inclusion of children on the research topic (Bailey et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2022; Verissimo et al., 2017). However, times when children's voices were included in research regarding teacher-child student attachment bonds is sparse and leaves a wealth of data not yet accessed. For instance, when labeling children as "participants" in their study, Cheng et al. (2022) utilized only the observations of educators who were then prompted to complete a survey. The researchers did not directly engage with the children. This, too, was the case in Bailey et al.'s (2022) research. As well, Verissimo et al. (2017) conducted interviews with students; however, the study followed a prescribed data collection exercise, not allowing the children to choose the mode of communication that they felt would best allow them to express their thoughts on the topic. When devising this research, I did not look to these or other examples in the literature as gaps, but instead as indicators of the great possibilities yet to be uncovered within educator-child relationship bonds. With this research I hope to offer the academy, and beyond, the next step in researching the topic.

Through the literature review, it is evident that AI is a methodology that has not yet been utilized to explore the topic of attachment between child and teaching team. AI has been used in other topics based in the school environment however; exploring issues of literacy (Hochstrasser Fickel et al., 2017), student self-advocacy (Kozik, 2018), and student engagement (Gray et al., 2019) to name a few. Although, engaging children themselves, particularly young students who have just entered the formal education system, is not well documented in the literature. There is some representation of children in AI literature (Gallagher et al., 2019; Horn & Govender, 2019), but these representations are of children in the later primary grades. Even in AI research that includes creative means or engages in arts to obtain data, the children included in the research have typically been older than the kindergarten years (see Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2019). This research was built as a study that is not currently represented in the literature: utilizing an AI framework that captures young children's voices through creative means (arts) on the topic of attachment with the teacher and Early Childhood Educator.

Conclusion

This chapter offered a comprehensive review of the literature that informed this Creative Appreciative Inquiry study. The literature explored above aided in the formation of the purpose of the research: to hear from kindergarten students and educators regarding how emotional bonds are created within the formal school setting. Linkages were made in the building of a paradigm that sees this topic through both an attachment and social constructivist lens before reviewing what current knowledge is evident in the academic sphere. As was made evident in this review, the literature on the topic of educator-child student relationship building continues to leave space for future exploration. Specifically connecting to this research endeavour, this study explored the topic utilizing an Appreciative Inquiry that infused arts methods to raise the kindergarten student

participants' voices and have their inclusion in the study a paramount factor in the research. As noted in this chapter, this type of research has yet to be identified in the literature.

In the following chapter, the Creative Appreciative Inquiry is explored in detail, connecting it to the process in exploring the topic of educator-child emotional bond formation and the research questions that are 1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? And, (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while away from their caregivers?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Building the methodology that could accomplish the task of valuing the voices of kindergarten students and their educators needed to be carefully constructed. Keeping to the epistemological position of truth and reality relying on perspective and social construction, it was important to develop a methodology that kept within the paradigm of knowing being first and always grounded in cultural and social context (Martinez-Brawley, 2020). This chapter will thoroughly explore the Creative Appreciative Inquiry built to explore the research questions of (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers?; and (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while they are away from their caregivers?

Beginning with a review of the action research methodology of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Arts-Informed Research (AIR) concepts will be presented and connected to the AI approach to construct a methodology that strongly connects to the theoretical underpinnings of attachment and social constructivism. The addition of AIR to AI also offers different means of engaging with the participants, particularly the kindergarten students. The benefits of employing a Creative AI methodology when attempting to bring young children's voices to the fore will be explored before offering other ethical considerations of this research. Following this, data collection methods for the study will be offered, linking the methods to the Creative AI methodology before considering the analysis process of the data collected. Lastly, limitations to the Creative AI methodology will be offered, with rationale provided, prior to concluding this chapter.

Appreciative Inquiry

As a qualitative methodology, AI is closely related to other action-based research methodologies (Gray et al., 2019). AI was conceptualized in the early 1980's, first utilized in a doctoral dissertation (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). Deeply rooted within AI is the concept of positive psychology, aiding scholars in their research to move beyond deficit-focused models to consider strength-based components in organizations and persons to build upon (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017; Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). Like other action research, AI is a methodology that does not merely investigate phenomena, but also aids in generating change for participants involved in the study (Fowler-Davis et al., 2021; von Heimburg et al., 2021). As people come together in a shared space to make new meaning through research participation, they are able to dream and design an ideal environment; identifying the positives that are already occurring more of the time. As part of the "activist" (Gray et al., 2019, p. 242) Participatory Action Research (PAR) family, AI studies connect participants and researchers on a deep level. In action research, participants' expertise in their own experiences are valued and they are an integral part in creating new meaning and pathways for change (Bradbury et al., 2019). Similar to PAR at times identifying participants as co-researchers, participants in AI studies are placed in an active role in the research; utilizing a high level of collaboration between them and the researcher and will position the participants in a co-investigator role (Coleman & Wiggans, 2017). Albeit still a relatively new form of action research, the AI methodology is increasingly being utilized in research practice due to its effective and sustainable approach to facilitating change and organizational development (Tezcan-Unal, 2018).

AI was selected for this particular research as the literature notes that it can offer educator-participants multiple opportunities to learn, envision, and implement positive elements for both their individual and collective benefit (Brunzell et al., 2019). Brunzell et al., go on to note that teachers enjoy the AI research process as it celebrates small successes, is not burdensome on their already busy schedules, and is seen as collaborative in creating shared definitions and visions. AI studies are also noted in the literature when considering early education practices (Tregenza & Campbell-Barr, 2023), and the topic of relationship building within the school setting (Brunzell et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2017). AI also spoke to me as a new researcher. Kozik (2018) highlights AI's highly engaging qualities and recognizes that AI is also a rigorous practice that elicits deep reflection on current strengths to build a shared plan for the future. It was important for me to select a methodology that (a) has some evidence of use on the topic of educator-child student relationship building while also (b) being a methodology that could aid in my ability to engage with participants.

Core Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

AI has five core principles that create a foundation for the methodology's overarching themes of building on strengths and optimism (Gray et al., 2019). The first principle of constructed reality recognizes that unique realities are formed through building relationships (and the language used to grow those connections) that offer paths to transformative change (Gray et al., 2019). The constructed reality principle places the participants and researcher on a parallel plane, emphasizing a high level of collaboration between the two roles to promote a new, more positive way forward towards a desired future reality.

As the second core principle, the positive frame of AI considers "positive forces" evident in research endeavours (Scandura, 2017, p. 142). Identifying persons' strengths, functioning social structures, and welcoming environments is important in the identification of what is working well and valuable to individuals and the organization and aids to promote positive change (Gray et al., 2019). As Pill (2016) notes, the positive framing of the AI methodology offers researchers an ability to move beyond problem-solving and towards positive-solving; using presenting strengths to address maladaptive issues (an element in the change process that is often overlooked, according to the author).

Simultaneity, the third core principle in the AI methodology, emphasizes that the change process begins at the very first point of inquiry (Watkins et al., 2020). According to Watkins et al., research is the intervention that looks to elicit change, just as the intervention acts as part of the research. True to the social constructivist paradigm (discussed further below), building new meaning within an AI process begins from the first point of communication and offers all those involved in the study an ability to "scaffold" (Scott & Armstrong, 2019, p. 118) their created knowledge to continuously move closer to lasting change (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). AI looks at multiple points for change occurrence (i.e. change in the person, the social relationships, the environment, Grey et al., 2019). However, the simultaneity principle highlights that all change within the AI research process, regardless of the type or level, begins with the connection between researcher and participant (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). Changes to the person, the social, and the environment are made possible through the commencement of the research process.

It is with the understanding that participants of the study are central to facilitating change that the fourth core principle, the poetic, begins to take shape (Gray et al., 2019). According to

the AI methodology, what is gleaned from the research, and what change is brought about from the study, builds the future we want to see (Heath, 2023). The poetic principle highlights that persons change and grow depending on social exchanges to which they enter (Gray et al., 2019). The future is formed through individuals being in a constant state of development. Exploring positives (the positive principle) as soon as the study begins (the simultaneity principle) has an impact on participants and in what way other individuals and the larger social construct grow around them (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017).

Participants' sense of hope within the AI research process generates the fifth and final core principle of the methodology: the anticipatory principle (Grey et al., 2019). The future that is envisioned and formed (the poetic principle) will be guided by how the participants see the future unfolding. Therefore, it is important for that vision to be inspiring and powerful (Watkins et al., 2020). Maintaining focus on positive attributes during research aids participants in aligning and connecting with those positives and thus can generate a sense of possibility and hope (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). In offering anticipatory images, visuals of a new, different, and better future, AI intends to propel research participants to action in the quest for lasting change (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017; Scott & Armstrong, 2019).

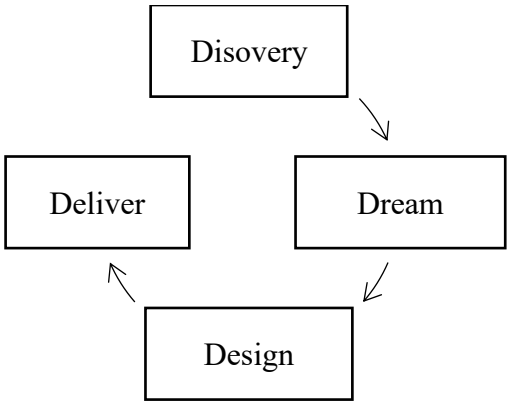
The 4D's of Appreciative Inquiry

Collectively, the five core principles of the AI methodology act as the foundation AI research throughout the entirety of the study. Regarding research process, researchers utilizing an AI methodology will typically follow a four-step delivery model, most commonly known as 4D (Charag & Fazili, 2018). The 4D's (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Deliver [or Destiny]) offer a logistical and successive map for engaging in AI research, particularly in data collection and analysis (discussed in Chapter 4: Results). Although some AI proponents have begun adopting a

fifth D (define) and a sixth D (drench) (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019), the 4D model (Figure 1) continues to be utilized by most AI practitioners and was the basis for my thesis research (Schrivastava et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2020).

Figure 1

The 4D Model of Appreciative Inquiry



Discovery. All AI research begins with the Discovery stage. In the Discovery stage, researchers look to uncover successes, skills, and strengths of the individuals, the social interactions, and the environment within a social construct (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). The term "discover" holds substantial theoretical meaning in the AI process as it highlights that AI assumes positives are already present within every individual and organization but must be discovered and promoted (Watkins et al., 2020). Upon entering into an AI process (simultaneity), an AI researcher begins to build connections (constructed reality) and seek out the positives (positive) to both influence ongoing growth (poetic) and potential change (anticipatory) in individuals (and so, the social structure). When an AI study begins, AI practitioners look to discover what "gives life" to the people and organization (Preston, 2017, p. 243). According to the AI methodology, discovering the life-giving elements in a particular setting is just as much about finding what is working well (the discovery) while also identifying and labeling those things with the participants as things to build on. Therefore, the Discovery stage of AI is the

place to begin the social construction of new learning and understanding, creating a dream of what might be (Preston, 2017; Watkins et al., 2020).

Dream. In creating new knowledge, practitioners and participants begin to formulate "provocative propositions," (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019, p. 51) in building a new future. The Dream phase amplifies themes of strength and success to begin the process of considering a new way of being; to dream of something better (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). During this phase, participants are connected with the researcher to review the data (the discoveries) to build new knowledge; acting as a catalyst for visualizing what might be possible for their future (Wakins et al., 2020). Meier and Geldenhuys (2017) note that this stage is of particular importance in satisfying the anticipatory principle because the convergence of past ("what has been") and future ("what might be") offer possibilities of hope to participants before engaging in actively building (or, designing) that future.

Design. As hope grows, the possibility of moving the idea of change from a far-off dream to the real and present becomes reality during the Design phase (Preston, 2017). Although the constructed reality principle is central to all AI practice, there is particular emphasis on the co-creation of knowledge during the Design stage (Watkins et al., 2020). According to Meier and Geldenbuys (2017), moving from a current state to instating visions for the future includes a consideration of pragmatic components that might need to be built or improved on. The Design process, then, intends to see the knowledge obtained in the previous stages to be molded into "actionable" knowledge (Coleman & Wiggins, 2017, p. 592).

Deliver. Delivering on the actionable knowledge offers all involved in the study the opportunity to tie the threads of possibility to reality (Pill, 2016). Govender (2021) understands this final stage to be a chance to walk the path of implementation, seeing strengths and skills that

have emerged in individuals now positively influencing the collective. Although the Deliver stage is identified as the final stage, AI does not necessarily end at delivery. The 4D model is intended to be a cyclical process whereby implementing new ways of being can offer new successes, skills, and strengths of the individuals, groups, and environment (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). In this sense, the Deliver stage can build momentum for future discoveries to move the group back into dreaming something even greater than what has been created (Lane et al., 2018).

Arts-Informed Research

Although AI is a methodology that is situated within contexts of constructed reality, generativity, and the presence of the researcher, it is far from the only research model to incorporate such concepts. In designing this research, exploring the topic of educator-kindergarten student attachment bonds through art mediums was selected as another means (beyond the AI process) to build new socially constructed interpretations of how the participants see the relationships forming. Utilizing art within research practice can be powerful in its ability to aid in generating new understanding (Leavy, 2018). As including art methods into research is becoming more frequent (Bolden, 2017), incorporating such activities can still be difficult for a new researcher. There is a plethora of arts research styles for fledgling academic researchers to learn and select. The different ways to infuse art into research can be confusing, and so discouraging, for academics who feel a longing to infuse art into their research (Leavy, 2018; Lampum, 2018). This confusion has included labels and terms, leading academics to use various labels interchangeably (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019) and other researchers suggesting using the term Arts-Based Research as an umbrella term as researchers wade into the waters of arts research (Leavy, 2018). Yet, for this study, Cole and Knowles' (2008) definition of Arts-

Informed Research (AIR) was identified as being a strong fit to complete the methodology I wished to create in studying educator and kindergarten student relationships. AIR continues to influence scholars and offers defining elements to steer both experienced and new researchers in infusing art into their studies (Bolden, 2017; Leavy, 2018). In addition, as is demonstrated below, AIR was fitting for my thesis research and Cole and Knowles' defining elements of AIR connect well to AI's core principles. To connect AI and AIR, I used Cole and Knowles' 4 elements of AIR (utilizing Bolden's categorization of the elements) in illustrating ways in which AIR would enhance the AI process; in general and for my particular area of research.

Methodological Integrity

Using art in research without a clear purpose, or including art simply for the sake of art, is not enough to merit its inclusion into empirical practice (Cologon et al., 2019). Cole and Knowles (2008) note that art practices in research must directly enhance (and be clearly apparent in) the research. Bolden (2017) notes that art in research should aid in achieving the research purposes and "illuminate" the work (p. 6). As Cole and Knowles put it, "the art for the art-based researcher extends to the creation of a process of inquiry" (p. 34). The application of visual art activities to AI research maintains, and can even improve, the integrity of AI's core principles. Particularly as it pertains to the constructed reality principle, AI explores new realities through the sharing of language (Gray et al., 2019). Art acts as an expressive language for children, offering an aesthetic opening for new communication (Cutcher & Boyd, 2018; Peterken, 2018). As Clough and Nutbrown (2019) note, children begin life through aesthetic understanding, with every person beginning to understand and communicate with the world through aesthetic interpretation. Engaging the kindergarten student participants in art activities as a means of communication was a critical part of this research in bringing their voices to the top of educator-

kindergarten student relationship discourse. Art offered them opportunity to use a different language to express themselves (Cutcher & Boyd, 2018).

Creative Inquiry Process

AIR requires the researcher to allow a "natural flow" (Mason, 2021) of the process, being attentive, mindful, and engaged during moments of inquiry. Allowing for the creative process to unfold without judgement, having the outcomes being formed organically by the art that is included in the research is imperative in the AIR process. In this sense, "the simpler (is) the deeper" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 34) in that AIR allows participants to follow their *dreams*, which is an integral part in the AI process. Through discovering the positives already occurring, participants begin to dream of a future that is different and more ideal. Sankarasubramanyan and Joshi (2019) label the dream phase in AI as "provocative propositions" (p. 51), allowing for participants and researchers to consider new realities and ways of being. Lawrence et al. (2017) offers a bridge from new realities of the participants and researchers to new realities to those readers of the research; noting that incorporating art in research can have a similar effect on those who interact with the art created through the research process. Lawrence et al., go on to note that art in research can also provide an opportunity for collective authorship. This ability to connect researcher and participants, and to the readership of the study, continues the constructed reality principle of AI (Gray et al., 2019).

Presence of the Researcher

The researcher must be located and felt within their AIR research (Bolden, 2017). It was important for me when engaging in this study that I was transparent with the participants (and, additionally, the greater audience of my research including those interacting with this dissertation) that I have no advanced formal training in art creation. However, Cole & Knowles

(2008) note that the artistry of an AIR researcher extends beyond technical training and skill to include creative and aesthetic connection to the purpose of the inquiry. I believe, as Nyberg (2019) highlights, the researcher/participant collaborative approach in navigating through visual art creation and interpretation offers children other mechanisms to have their voices heard. As with most other qualitative research, I intended to offer my presence through creating co-researcher relationships with participants in the study through semi-structured interviews (Coleman & Wiggans, 2017; Martyn et al., 2019). Beyond this, I aimed to locate myself within the "researcher-as-artist" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61) identity by engaging in art exercises with the children and utilizing the draw-and-tell exercises and semi-structured interviews to open up opportunity for interpreting the kindergarten students' art together.

Centrality of Audience Engagement

Eliciting social and organizational change through action is a central feature of AI research (Coleman & Wiggins, 2017). One of AIR's key tenets is to utilize art in promoting new thought and in encouraging action (Bolden, 2017). In combining AI and AIR, I wanted to facilitate the change process at multiple points of the inquiry and beyond through engaging an audience beyond the academy. As noted above, AI intends to begin the change process at its inception (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). In addition to change commencing at the onset of the research, utilizing AIR within the appreciative process offered additional means of change promotion as the study also engaged participants in the 4Ds of AI research (all of which add to the change process). Beyond this, by utilizing arts-informed methods to better learn from and understand participants, the study holds even greater potential to promote positive change (Gerber et al., 2020). According to Stephens Griffin (2019), these changes can expand well

beyond the participants of the study to include those outside the academy when working with the combination of visuals and words.

A Creative Appreciative Inquiry

There are examples of researchers utilizing AI (see Brunzell et al., 2019) and the arts (see Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020) to explore the topic of relationships between students and those who educate them in a formal school setting. Yet, combining AI and AIR into one empirical study to investigate the topic of children's attachment to their education team is not identified in the literature. Bringing AI and AIR together to explore the topic offered a unique perspective in answering both research questions above. AI, with its roots in positive psychology, is a well positioned methodology to investigate children's perceptions of the helpful things a teacher and Early Childhood Educator (ECE) do at school to have the kindergarten students feel safe and cared for. Complimenting the AI process through offering art exercises gave children multiple means of expressing their views, offering a deeper understanding of what actions the teacher and ECE do to have the children feel safe with them while in their care.

There are benefits to "interweaving" (Hochstrasser Fickel et al., 2017, p.394) multiple methodological frameworks within the AI process. Through an understanding that all arts-informed research (AIR) intends to enhance the study to which it is being applied (Cole & Knowles, 2008), I saw multiple points of connection between AI and the arts that ended in building a strong methodological direction for this research. Outside of the research process directly, bridging this study to a broader audience outside the academy was also a concern that propelled the logical connection to bringing AIR into the AI process (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Ayrton, 2020).

Important to me as I selected the methodology for this research was that both AI and AIR look to empower participants in the study, offering them agency within research. Cologon et al. (2019) understand arts methods within research, and particularly with children, as opening up greater means of communication and understanding between researcher and participants. Utilizing arts in the data collection offered child participants greater opportunity for agency in expressing themselves and actively contributing to building new-meaning within the research process. Latham and Ewing (2018) note that offering arts as a mode of producing expression for young children engaged in research can also have positive influences on verbal communication as well, allowing for greater verbal expression while being guided by the art they have created. The draw-and-tell method was employed to offer children the opportunity to partner their art with verbal expression (see below for more information on the methods utilized). Similar to AIR's direction to expand opportunities for participants to express themselves, the AI process looks to empower participants, seeing participants grow and learn beyond the parameters of the study for lasting positive change (Reed, 2006). AI intends for participants to become self-agents in building and sustaining positive culture within the environment(s) they are embedded within (Sharp et al., 2018). This is true for all participants and includes children being defined as competent and valued members within the AI process (Ruscoe et al., 2018).

Within the context of Attachment and Social Constructivism

Although literature is sparse, there are some examples of the AI methodology being utilized in looking at the topic of attachment and relationship development between educators and students. Mostly, contemporary literature that explores relationship building within a school setting through an AI process focuses on the relationships between caregivers and the school system (Flavell, 2023; Tregenza et al., 2023). There are few articles that focus specifically on

relationship building between students and their educators and, of those, most explore older student participants (Howard et al., 2021; Rutherford, 2024). There are even fewer studies still that target attachment theory specifically through an AI lens (Brunzell et al., 2019). Yet, exploring attachment and educator-child relationships has a logical connection to AI. Building strong and secure Internal Working Models relies on the consistent positive interactions between caregiver and child (Speidel et al., 2023). Most research methodologies however, continue to focus on deficits and gaps in the topic of study (Hochstrasser Fickel et al., 2017). The positive frame core principle of AI balks at the trend of looking for what is missing and instead looks to highlight the efforts of participants that can aid in the growth or change for better (Grey et al., 2019). Considering this, the AI methodology places attachment research within the frame of what positive interactions between educators and kindergarten students add to building feelings of safety and care while the children are at school, which is the primary focus of this research.

Finally, it is important to note that AI and AIR align well with a social constructivist worldview. As Charag and Fazili (2018) describe it, AI is "an invitation to a positive revolution" (p. 4). Socially constructing realities is a grounding theoretical framework in AI as it aims to build knowledge and ideas for change through collaboration and co-development exercises (Charag & Fazili, 2018; Gray et al., 2019). Vygotsky (1978) believed that truths and realities are constructed through social interaction and language (both verbal and the many forms of non-verbal). As AI recognizes that "words make worlds (Coleman & Wiggans, 2017, p. 585; Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017, p. 2), it uses language and interpersonal connections to forge new pathways towards transformational change (Gray et al., 2019). Likewise, Al-Jawed (2015) connects arts methods of research with social constructivism, noting that the language of comics (the author's particular medium) offers an excellent forum to display the multiple complexities

of human experience through the constructed reality participants and researchers create. Together, visual arts methods in research create an excellent "visual narrative" (Lee, 2019) to illustrate the transformative process that occurs during participatory action research.

Ethical Considerations

When building the Creative Appreciative Inquiry for this study, Salamon's (2017) interpretation of praxis as practice and research was influential. Salamon posits that praxis seeks transformation that is informed through the researcher's past experiences. In bringing my past into this study, I reflected on how this creates a value-laden element to this research. That is, identifying myself as a researcher means identifying myself within the research; I cannot remove my influence from empirical study I present (Salamon, 2017). In Chapter 1: Introduction, I offered the reader my positionality and the influences that have brought me to studying the topic of educator-child attachment bonds. Yet, it is ethically prudent for me to also be transparent in locating myself in the results (Chapter 4) and discussion (Chapter 5) portions of this presentation of research. In constructing this Creative Appreciative Inquiry, I hope this research does not only convey the stories of the participants, and particularly raise the voice of the children participants (more on this below), but that it also offers (and adds to) a little piece of my story as well.

Another consideration of this research was recognizing that I do not belong to the culture or environment I studied. I was an outsider, looking to those on the inside to share their story with me; trusting I would share that story in an ethical way that is accurate to them. Boerman-Cornell (2016) noted that a researcher who comes from outside of the environment of study can maintain a position of moderate participant. A moderate participant moves closer to an insider's perspective through the time, engagement, and methods of data collection with the participants (Boerman-Cornell, 2016). However, the researcher is always balancing between insider and

outsider. For me to move closer to the insider perspective, I had to be mindful of the methods selected for data collection (more on this below) to ensure they would also allow me to actively engage with the participants.

From an ethical stance, conducting research with young children compels a researcher to consider the inherent risks to the children when entering into the study. I began this consideration from the position that children have the right to be included in the research that involves them. Mayne and Howitt (2015) note that the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) laid the foundation for contemporary research with children and prescribes the notion that research must always uphold the best interests of the children; promoting their autonomy, agency, empowerment, voice and participation. Indeed, as Jørgensen (2019) notes, the UNCRC highlight that to see child agency and empowerment in research, they should be active participants in the research.

To be actively participate in research, the researcher must provide opportunity for the participants to understand and appreciate the purpose of the study and the expectations for participating. However, contemporary literature continues to offer examples of children engaging in research with little knowledge of the study they are involved in, with consents being secured with caregivers and little attention paid to child assent (Bailey et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2023). Even when engaging with child participants directly to involve them in the assent process, researchers continue to rely on verbal communication only (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). For this project, care was taken to communicate, both verbally and through visuals, the participant information needed to be informed in the study's process and expectations with the kindergarten students. Offering this multimodal approach to securing assent has been shown in the literature to increase interest and comprehension of research purposes, procedures, and risks (Massetti et

al., 2018). For the assent comic book that was read aloud to the children, and reviewed and signed by caregivers wishing for them and their child to participate, please see Appendix A.

Once the kindergarten students were informed of the research through audio, literary, and visual means, and they and their caregivers agreed to participate, it became just as vital that the children remained informed and could express themselves in the research. To continue to promote active participation, a draw-and-tell method was utilized (Wiseman et al., 2018). The draw-and-tell approach is detailed below, however it is important to note here that it offered an ethical position of (a) providing the children participants an alternative means to contribute to the research (Latham & Ewing, 2018), (b) an opportunity for member checking and ensuring accuracy of my interpretations of the art they created and, (c) a foundation from which triangulation of the data could happen with the caregivers when exploring the art and description submitted by their children (Martin, 2019).

Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board approved this research on May 5, 2022. The protocol highlighted three areas of potential risk for participants. The first two areas, risk of psychological harm and discussing sensitive topics, pertained to participants engaging in exercises of reflection and recall regarding experiences with attachment bonds in a school setting. All participants would be engaged in some way to consider how attachment bonds have been formed in the classroom and how they persist. For educators and children, the reflections may bring up times that bonds were difficult to form, or perhaps formed insecurely. For the caregivers, such reflections might have them remembering their own experiences while at school or perhaps revisit struggles their child has faced in emotionally connecting with an educator. It was important to mitigate these risks as much as possible by clearly noting (and reminding of) the voluntary nature of participating in the research, making sure the participants knew they

could withdrawal from the study at any time and without repercussions. There were also opportunities for participants to take breaks during data collection times to aid in lessening any stress felt during their participation in the study. No participants requested nor exhibited (through verbal or non-verbal physical cues) requiring breaks during the study.

The final risk to participants was regarding confidentiality. All participants would be known to persons other than themselves. The education team would be known to the kindergarten students, caregivers, and, because of the recruitment practices (expanded on below) the school board administration and principal. Additionally, the children and caregivers participating would be known to the educators. Due to the nature of the methodology and methods of the study, anonymity was not possible, and the participants were informed of this prior to consenting/assenting to participate. Upholding a high level of confidentiality and protecting participants' personal information was considered a high ethical priority. Therefore, no names of participants are offered throughout this document nor any other dissemination practice. Instead, the educators, kindergarten students, and caregivers are identified using pseudonyms. Participants were not requested to provide pseudonyms at the point of data collection, names were assigned to participants by me as the researcher for the purpose of dissemination. Pseudonyms were selected with a view to offer gender-neutrality so as to not assume the children participants gender as well as to maintain the added level of anonymity of not using their given or last names. Other identifying factors, such as the location and name of the school and school board, are protected and not disclosed. Finally, in an additional confidentiality protection exercise, any data collected was cleaned to remove all names (replaced with the descriptors identified above), converted into electronic form (for all, consent and assent documents, children's art, and handwritten observation notes) prior to destroying all hard copies,

and is now stored under two passwords (i.e. a password protected file folder in a password protected laptop computer).

Recruitment/Sampling

A purposeful sample was utilized for this research. Although a variety of sampling techniques are utilized in AI literature when various groups are represented in the study (see Burns et al., 2020 and Sharpe & Corpus, 2022), there are many examples of AI researchers use of purposeful sampling, particularly when the studies involve child participants (for examples, see Gallagher et al., 2019 and Horn & Govender, 2019). Regarding this particular research endeavour, purposeful sampling was selected as the topic pertains specifically to the formal education system and kindergarten students. Rationale for keeping the research focus on one classroom was rooted in the understanding that both AI (Lane et al., 2018) and AIR (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019) research balks at the positivist direction of attempting to generalize research findings and instead look to find new truths that hold deep meaning for those participating in the research (Bailey & Van Harken, 2014; Bradbury et al., 2019). Believing this research had the potential of enriching the lives of those participating within the research, one classroom was the focus of this research. The decision of keeping to one classroom is supported in the literature and is demonstrated through other examples of single classroom research (Rhoades, 2016; Scott & Armstrong, 2019).

The school board approached for the purpose of recruiting an education team in a kindergarten class was selected because of the geographical location in which the board was situated. Following the board's acceptance of their internal ethics protocol for partnering with external researchers, the project was referred to the school board's Mental Health Lead who identified the kindergarten educators to approach. Selection of the educators was based on the

Mental Health Lead's familiarity with the research protocol and focus of the study (i.e. an Appreciative Inquiry looking to highlight educator strengths and abilities in formulating attachments with their kindergarten students), educators' expressed interest in participating in the research, and knowledge of educators' practices such as the educators' background/training and interpersonal dynamics that were likely to provide strong examples of what educators do to have kindergarten students feel safe and cared for while at school (Research Question 2). As the Nipissing University ethic's protocol directed, the education team was approached first by the Mental Health Lead and then, upon expressing interest, the Mental Health Lead connecting the team to me via email.

I met with the teacher, Ms. Kent, and the ECE, Ms. Elden, for the first time in person and reviewed the participant information letter and informed consent document created for educators (see Appendix B) and the participant information letter and informed consent comic created for students (see Appendix A). The educators each signed a copy of the consent document. Through our conversation, we set a time for me to come back to the classroom to review the assent document with the kindergarten students and agreed to the first 12 children within the class who had expressed assent (through verbal expression, offering affirming body language such as head nods, and illustrating a happy face on the assent document) and their caregivers expressed consent (via signing and returning the assent document to the education team) would participate in the research. The number 12 was selected because (a) the educators reflected on past efforts to have caregivers agree to voluntary efforts via signed and returned consent forms being under half of the close to 30 kindergarten students, (b) wanting to keep the data collected manageable yet rich enough to reach saturation. Regarding the latter, Contemporary AI studies have indicated reaching saturation with as little as 5 (Mandal, 2022) to 7 (Hartsough, 2022) total participants

while previous studies on the topic of educator-child attachment have been conducted using as few as four participants (see Albin-Clark et al., 2018). Also, previous research that looks at relationship factors between teachers and kindergarten students have been non-discriminatory regarding the year standing of the child, so this was not a factor considered in the recruitment process (Stagg Peterson et al., 2019).

Assent and Consent

Educators were presented with the participant information letter and informed consent document created for educators (see Appendix B) during the initial in-person meeting. The education team was provided time to review the document. During our meeting, the educators took the time to read each section. Sections included a description of the purpose of the study, description of all data collection methods, privacy and confidentiality measures to be utilized, risks and benefits regarding participation, and identifying the voluntary nature of participating, recognizing participants' ability to end their participation at any time and without repercussions. Following each section's read, the review was paused and Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden were asked if they had any questions prior to moving onward with the review. During each pause, I offered a verbal reiteration of the section's contents and answered any questions voiced by the team. The education team verbally expressed their consent to participate and signed the document. The sections of the consent document were verbally revisited multiple times throughout the study with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden.

To secure the assent of the kindergarten students, the education team and I planned a presentation of the participant information letter and informed consent comic created for students (see Appendix A) to the class. A whole-class approach to reviewing the assent comic was used to reduce risks of coercion and power imbalances (Pyle, 2016). To offer a multimodal approach for

assent purposes, ensuring children have opportunities to demonstrate interest and comprehension of research purposes, procedures, and risks, the comic was read aloud to them (the comic was presented on the SMART board), pausing frequently throughout the read to allow children to process and verbally explore what they were being presented (Wall, 2017). In addition, all children were provided a comic to take home with them accompanied by a video read-along (via YouTube) to provide the opportunity to revisit the research procedures with their caregivers. Assent was understood to be secured by implicit body language (e.g. demonstrating interest through the presentation of the comic by smiles, asking questions, and attentiveness to the SMART board), explicit verbal and non-verbal confirmation to the question "who would like to help me in my research" (e.g. hands raised, head nods, "me" statements), and the kindergarten students signing the document with either their name or drawing a smiley face on the last page of the document.

There were 12 kindergarten students were identified as participants. The identification resulted through a combination of both the child assent offerings and their respective caregivers consent declaration. The latter was secured by attaching the participant information letter and informed consent document created for caregivers (see Appendix C) to the assent comic and sending it home for the caregivers to review and sign both documents before returning them to the school. The first 12 assent comics and caregiver consent documents returned identified the children that would participate in the study. Caregivers were selected for semi-structured interviews using the maximum variation technique in purposeful sampling (Stake, 2003). Caregivers were selected in consultation with the education team during their interviews based on their children's art, the art being a strong representation of the themes being formulated, and past availability of responsiveness of the caregiver. From the educator interviews, six caregivers

were selected for interviews. However, one caregiver could not be reached (attempts were made via email and telephone), leaving the total number of caregiver participants at five. Table 1 lists the identified participants of this research.

Table 1

List of Participants (Pseudonyms)

Educators	Ms. Kent (Teacher) Ms. Elden (Early Childhood Educator)	Total number of educators: 2
Children	Asher Avery Greer Gatlan Hayden Hunter Kal Kayce Olsen Sunny Taeo Taylen	Total number of children: 12
Caregivers	Annie (caregiver of Asher) Ginny (caregiver for Greer) Hanna (caregiver for Hunter) Sarah (caregiver for Sunny) Tessa (caregiver for Taeo)	Total number of caregivers: 5
		Total number of participants: 19

Data collection methods

To create a "living picture" (Clark, 2017, p. 33) of kindergarten students' and educators' experiences in building relationships with one another, this research incorporated multiple and creative means to collect data. Much of the literature that captures young children in research continues to identify researchers and adults as authoritative figures and children as too immature or cognitively incapable of offering meaningful contributions to the research (Bakr et al., 2018; Wall et al., 2019). Maintaining the position of child participants lacking competence to actively

participate in research not only is in contrast with the United Nations' Convention of the Rights of the Child (Mayne & Howitt, 2015), but also relegates them to a position of object within empirical studies; depersonalizing this particularly vulnerable demographic and undervaluing the different perspective they can offer (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). By including multiple methods of engaging with the young participants, researchers can offer various platforms for their active contribution, eliciting new ways of knowing and considering the research topic (Clark, 2017). Specifically, offering creative means in the multiple ways of capturing the kindergarten students' voices in research, such as incorporating arts exercises, is a way to value and include young children in the research process (Botsoglou et al., 2019).

Considering the above, this creative appreciative inquiry looked to include multiple means of data collection across two cycles of the 4D AI process. Incorporating a second cycle of the AI process is supported in the literature (Tezcan-Unal, 2018) and was adopted to offer additional opportunities for the child participants to engage in art exercises to actively contribute to the research. As Tezcan-Unal notes, ending one 4D cycle (that is, at the Deliver stage) to enter into the beginning a second cycle (that is, the Discovery stage) enriches both data collection and the AI experiences for the participants, Figure 2 illustrates the data collection process for this research.

Throughout the two cycles of AI's 4D process, data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with the education team (3), Classroom observations (6), classroom discussions and brainstorming sessions (2), draw-and-tell classroom activities (2), and caregiver semi-structured interviews (6). Rationale for the selection of each method, along with when to implement each method across the two 4D cycles, is offered below. To help illustrate the

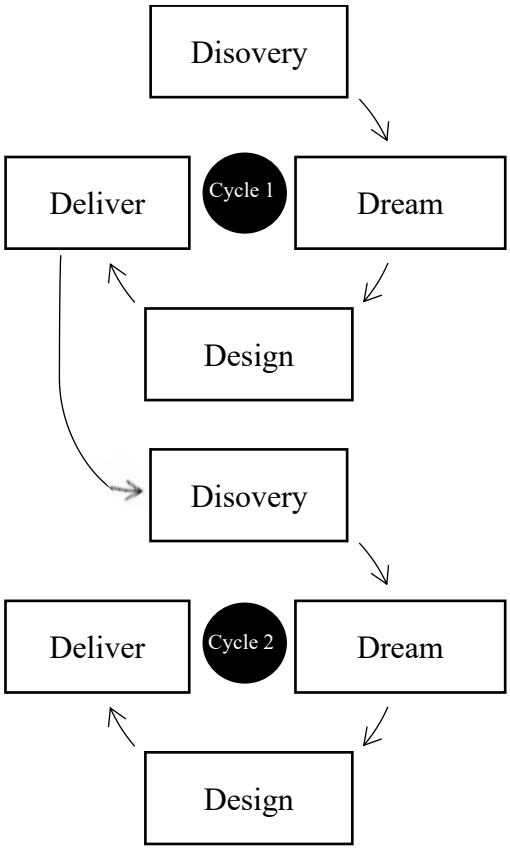
roadmap of the method collection process, Figure 3 offers the two 4D cycles with data collection methods identified in each stage.

Cycle 1 Discovery: Educator Interview

Data collection began with the first stage in the 4D process of AI: Discovery. The Discovery stage began with a semi-structured interview with the education team. A list of

Figure 2

Data Collection Process

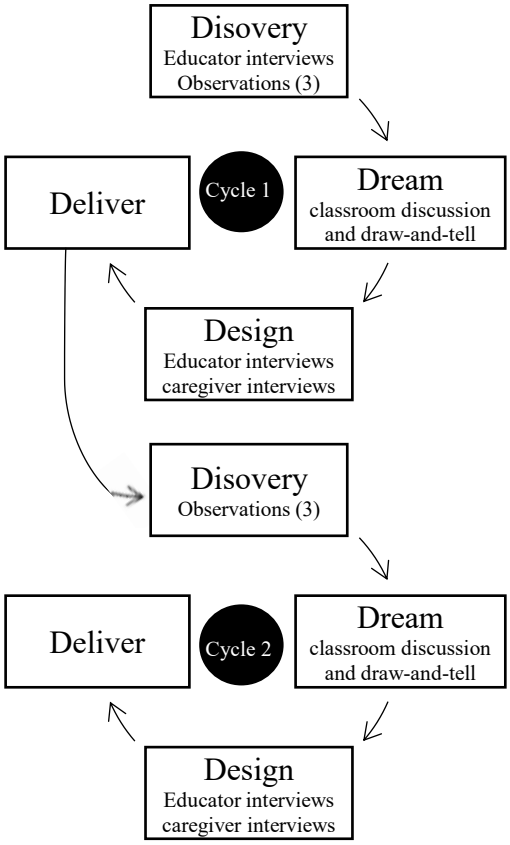


guiding questions for this interview is offered in Appendix D. Meeting with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden served multiple purposes. First, including the identification of the education team acting at times as co-researchers, was an essential preliminary step as Coleman & Wiggins (2017) note that role definition in the AI methodology creates a sense of co-ownership of the study on the

part of the participants. Connecting with the education team also acted as an exercise in continuing to build collegiality and rapport. The meeting served to build connection with the education team while also exploring the topic of what my future rapport building with the children might look like (Tezcan-Unal, 2018). Also, the interview helped me draw on the experiences of the teaching team (Xerri, 2018) to continue to build and evolve the proposed AI process to meet the needs of the participants and address the research questions more fully (Reed, 2006).

Figure 3

Data Collection Process with Methods



This exploration of the proposed research also offered me an opportunity to begin to interact with and learn from the educators' insider knowledge, identifying pathways to explore the research questions but also to consider potential hurdles or obstacles in moving forward

(Gallagher et al., 2019). Just as Albin-Clark et al. (2018) exemplify in the literature, this initial conversation with the education team explored how they defined key concepts of educator-child attachment and what Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden understood as beneficial to building a relationship of care and safety with each of the kindergarten students. It was decided to engage the education team together in the interview process and to not hold interviews with each educator separately. Group interviews, such as what was conducted for this study, occur in many AI studies and connects to the constructed reality principle of AI (Martyn et al., 2019; Preston, 2017). In fact, Meier and Geldenhuys (2017) note that the Discovery portion of AI is often conducted with more than one participant.

Cycle 1 Discovery: Classroom Observations

The initial interview with the education team also offered an opportunity to coordinate dates and times to continue the Discovery phase of the 4D model through three classroom observations. Observations are a common data collection method in qualitative research and has been utilized specifically in AI studies (Dewar & MacBride, 2017; Watkins et al., 2019) and AIR studies (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2017; Zapata et al., 2018). The observation days and times were agreed upon during week one and purposefully selected to provide the greatest opportunity to view relationship building/strengthening (Carbonneau et al., 2020). The purpose for conducting the observations was to build additional knowledge on how teachers form positive connections with the kindergarten students by observing their interactions with one another in real time (Carbonneau et al., 2020). Dale and Smith (2020) highlight that observations, both in person and via video technology, have been readily used in attachment research. As such, both handwritten notes and the videoconferencing software program Zoom (as an audio/video recording tool) were utilized to capture and revisit observation data.

Cycle 1 Dream: Classroom discussion and Draw-and-Tell

To begin the Dream stage of the first cycle of AI's 4D model, the kindergarten students were engaged following the completion of the three observations. We began with a classroom discussion and brainstorming session to include the children in further building the socially constructed concepts of attachment first created with the education team during the first semi-structured interview. For a list of questions used during this exercise, please refer to Appendix D Using group dialogue is common in AI studies and, as Scandura (2017) notes, can encourage innovative visions of what is and what can be. Group discussion as a means of data collection is also an established method while utilizing arts-based approaches (Clark, 2017) and is documented in the literature as a pathway to constructing kindergarten students' concept definitions and meaningful participation in research (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). Utilizing arts within AI research is uncommon in the literature, however Bergmark and Kostenius (2018) note there are benefits to applying visual arts exercises to the 4D process. Although only 12 children were identified as participants, Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board approved of non-participating kindergarten students to be involved in data collection activities to reduce risks of feelings of stigma and exclusion. Therefore, all children participated in this and all other child-based activities for this research.

Following the collective definitions exercise, the kindergarten students engaged in a draw-and-tell activity (Wiseman et al., 2018). To complete the draw portion of the exercise, the children were prompted to visually express the key concepts they identified in the group discussion that have them feeling safe and cared for while at school. Using visual arts to offer greater opportunity to communicate with children is well documented in arts research literature (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Cologon et al., 2019). Utilizing arts can elicit different and deeper

responses from children (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019) and, as Bergmark and Kostenius (2018) note, thorough responses from children need not come from complex verbal questioning from the researcher.

Once the art creation activity concluded, the tell segment of the draw-and-tell exercise began. As Wall (2017) notes, engaging young children in art is not enough to ensure they are active participants in the research. Following an art activity, it is important for researchers to leave space for children to verbally explore their interpretations of what they have created (Wall, 2017). Considering Wall's understanding of ethical research with children, the kindergarten students presented their art to me individually (while the other children completed their art or moved on to other classroom activities) to explore what they had created. Simple open-ended prompts such as "can you explain what you have drawn" and follow up questions like "how did you feel during that time" are sufficient for opening a pathway for children to express themselves (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018). In fact, Colliver (2017) recognizes that more formal questions can present as interrogatory and intimidating to young children and should be avoided. For a list of questions offered to the kindergarten students to explore their art creations, please see Appendix D. By engaging the children in dialogue via verbal and aesthetic communication, new knowledge and understanding of educator-kindergarten student relationships was formed.

Cycle 1 Design: Educator Interview

Data collection continued with a second education team group interview. This method commenced the Design portion in the first cycle of 4D model. Including all previously collected data; including the observations, classroom brainstorming session, and the draw-and-tell exercise; the education team were reengaged as co-researchers, asking them to aid in analysing and interpreting the data with the purpose of threading common themes together. Henry and

Thorsen (2018) discuss the importance of offering teachers a forum to describe their own experiences while engaged in research. To achieve this, questions noted in Appendix D were utilized. For additional details regarding the analysis of data, please see the Analysis section below and Chapter 5: Discussion. The themes were generated with the education team aided in the uncovering of positives that existed in the classroom, that then could be developed into new pathways for the educators to move from *what might be* to *what is* (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). As noted above, the Design process includes clear steps that are needed for the implementation of change (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017). In this sense, the second meeting with the education team acted also as an opportunity for Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden to think of ways to act, or deliver, on what we were identifying as needs of kindergarten students to feel safe and cared for, and how the educators fulfill those needs.

Cycle 1 Design: Primary Caregivers' Interviews

To better understand the kindergarten student participants' contributions to the study during the discussion and draw-and-tell exercises, ensuring design elements constructed with the education team accurately interpreted children voices, select primary caregivers were contacted to explore their children's artwork. For more information on the caregiver selection process, please see the Recruitment/Sampling section above. Primary caregivers have played an integral part of research with children, particularly for research looking at issues with young children transitioning to kindergarten (Miller, 2015; Welsh et al., 2016) and attachment research (Pérez et al., 2017; Psychogiou et. al, 2018). Engaging primary caregivers in semi-structured interviews not only captures the voices of the caregivers, but it can also have positive effects on the children participants as well, deepening their experiences within the study (Clark, 2017). The questions posed to caregivers during these interviews are found in Appendix D. Collecting primary

caregivers' interpretations of their child's art can act as an informative process to research (Latham & Ewing, 2018) and mitigates concern of them acting as gatekeepers to their child's voice (Cowie & Khoo, 2017). By including the primary caregivers, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of all the children's voices.

Cycle 2 Deliver and Discovery: Revisiting 4D

As noted above, Tezcan-Unal (2018) highlights the benefits of utilizing the end of one cycle to propel AI into another 4D cycle, deepening the AI experience for participants and enriching data collection. Therefore, participants engaged in a second 4D cycle. The second cycle began with entering into three more classroom observations as a means of further discovering ways the education team offered messages of safety and care to the children. With our knowledge having been deepened by the first cycle of 4D, the last three observations offered the added benefit of being able to highlight the ways Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden fostered secure attachments in kindergarten students, both in alignment with what was observed in the first three observations and in ways that were perhaps previously missed. Following the observations, the children were reengaged in a second classroom discussion that re-explored their concepts of safety and care. An added brainstorming session offered the kindergarten students the same opportunity the adult participants were afforded to revisit the key concepts of this study and to socially construct their definitions of those concepts further. The kindergarten students entered into their second draw-and-tell exercise immediately following the classroom discussion. Data collection continued with a final interview conducted with the education team that aided in data analysis and identifying caregiver participants to contact. Reconnecting with the primary caregivers was important to the triangulation of the data (Martin, 2019) to once again broaden

the capturing of the children's voices before ending the data collection. The interviews with the caregivers (four were selected for the second cycle of 4D) concluded data collection.

Analysis

This study applied a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For a thorough review of analysis practices, please see Chapter 4: Results. As Maguire and Delahunt (2017) note, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic analysis is employed throughout the data collection process and should be consistently referenced and applied throughout the research study. In addition to this, Braun and Clarke (2019) themselves implore researchers that the stepped model they offer for analyzing data should not be followed in a linear fashion to promote a more fluid thematic development. Adding a second cycle of the 4D process in the AI methodology promoted an ability to balk at a strict linear process of analysis. For instance, initial codes (step 2) identified through the observations in the first 4D cycle that aided in the development of preliminary themes (step 3) and were reviewed by the education team (step 4) were then reassessed (step 2) utilizing new data collected from Cycle 2. The "reflexive" element of the analysis included the consideration of the themes with an understanding that they are rooted within the philosophical and procedural elements of how this study was conceived. That is, the themes that were developed are a product of my conversations with the education team and who I am as a researcher. Following data collection, thematic analysis was concluded through the use of the NVivo software program. The literature notes that AI studies have utilized qualitative data analytical software such as NVivo to further validate initial codes and themes (Fowler-Davis et al., 2022). Therefore, NVivo was accessed to provide another layer in assessing the generated themes' reliability and alignment with the purpose of the study (Allsop et al., 2022).

Limitations

The design of this study was purposeful in that my intention was to provide a rich and detailed description of the educator and kindergarten student participants' experiences with the topic of attachment building within the formal education system. On that topic, I wanted to work closely with the participants to shine a light on what the children in the classroom needed from the educators to feel safe and cared for, and what the educators did to address those needs. To delve deeply into the participants' understandings of building their relationships, limitations to the design were unavoidable. Particularly, this project was not designed to employ the findings in a generalizable way. The detailed results offered in Chapter 4 are those of the children, their caregivers, and the educators who belong to the community of the single kindergarten classroom studied in Northern Ontario.

Yet, although the design of this Creative Appreciative Inquiry is not intended to lend itself to generalizing to other environments, there is merit in exploring the specific and unique. As Bradbury et al. (2019) highlights, in avoiding the quest for seeking *the* truth that can be identified globally, qualitative research promotes discovering *a* truth to the participants specific to the research being conducted, allowing for an exposing of deep meaning to enrich the lives of those participants. In addition, those truths that hold deep meaning for the participants can still be beneficial to others who interact with their story (Ayrton, 2020). In creating this research design, I wanted to not merely capture the participants' stories, but to also share their stories in ways that honour and are accurate to them. For further exploration of limitations to this study please refer to Chapter 5: Discussion.

Conclusion

To explore attachment bonds formed between educators and kindergarten students, it was important to me to build a methodology that provided opportunity to bring child and educator voices into the discourse on this topic. The end result of the efforts to design a study that would value participants' experiences with relationship building while in the formal education system was a Creative Appreciative Inquiry. The pairing of AI with arts informed research practice was considered from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. AI's social constructivist underpinnings (Watkins et al., 2020) offered a strong foundation for me to build a research project that was truly designed to learn from the participants, growing knowledge with them as we explored the topic of study. Infusing arts-based methods gave opportunity for all participants to actively contribute, valuing their voices when perhaps those voices were conveyed by means beyond auditory speech (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019). In Chapter 4: Results, data garnered from this Creative Appreciative Inquiry is explored in detail, offering examples from each of the methods reflected upon above to begin to share the story of how emotional bonds have been, and continue to be, formed in the kindergarten classroom that was the environment of study.

Chapter 4: Results and Findings

The purpose of this research endeavour was to hear from kindergarten students and educators regarding how emotional bonds are created within the formal school setting, bringing the children's voices to the fore of teacher/child attachment discourse. A qualitative methodology was utilized for this study to bring a richness to stories that illustrate attachments being formed and fostered. Methods employed during the data collection process included semi-structured interviews with the education team of the classroom teacher and Early Childhood Educator (ECE), guided art exercises with the children, and semi-structured interviews with selected caregivers. For a complete list of all questions that guided these activities, see Appendix D. To analyze the data collected, a reflexive thematic analysis was adopted and utilized within two cycles of the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry. Data analysis was supported through the use of the NVivo software program.

The analysis of the data focused on the two research questions of this project: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? And, (2) how do teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while away from their caregivers? This chapter intends to offer the reader an opportunity to see *the forest through the trees* by sharing the data collection process and analysis exercises that were undertaken. Following the detailing of the analysis process will be a presentation of the findings, offered within four prominent themes that emerged as a result.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection throughout the study followed the typical progression of the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Deliver.

4Ds of AI

Analyzing data within an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology can happen throughout the entirety of the data collection process and across all stages of the 4D model (Grey et al., 2019). This study engaged with participants through two cycles of the 4D model (for a thorough review of the 4D model adopted for this research, please refer to Chapter 3: Methodology above). The process began within the Discovery stage with the primary purposes of (1) uncovering the skills of the education team in forming attachments with the child participants, and (2) giving voice to the kindergarten students to identify their needs in building emotional connections with their teacher and ECE (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). During this stage, data collection exercises included an initial semi-structured interview with the education team, three classroom observations, and a guided art exercise with the children. The Dream stage was also included in the art exercise, where kindergarten students were offered a draw-and-tell opportunity to explore future possibilities for how they see their needs of being safe and cared for can be met in the future (Meier and Geldenhuys, 2017; Wiseman et al., 2018). The education team was reengaged in a second semi-structured interview to enter into the Design stage, where data collected to that point was analysed and coded into categories and potential themes. The Design stage continued with identifying caregivers of participating kindergarten students' whose artwork fell into the categories identified. During a semi-structured interview with individual caregivers, caregivers' impressions and interpretations of their child's art was collected as a means of further informing the research and the Delivery stage (Latham & Ewing, 2018; Preston, 2017). The Delivery stage occurs with the education team implementing change in actions and behaviours that are the result of what was discovered in the other stages (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). Data collection continued with 3 more classroom observations that acted as both (1)

opportunities for the education team deliver more and new strategies to emotionally connect with the kindergarten students that was uncovered during the first 4D cycle while also (2) beginning a new 4D cycle to discover other and new actions that will aid in children's ability to form attachments with the education team. Utilizing the end of one 4D cycle to begin another one is identified as beneficial in the literature (Tezcan-Unal, 2018). The second 4D cycle followed the same data collection methods as the first: 3 observations and guided art exercise (Discovery), a draw-and-tell activity (Dream), and semi-structured interviews with the education team and selected caregivers (Design). The final Delivery will follow the research and includes dissemination practices of this study, to be explored further in Chapter 6: Conclusion.

A Participatory Action Process.

Appreciative Inquiry is understood to be within the family of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Watkins et al., 2020). It is an increasingly utilized methodological approach to research (Tezcan-Unal, 2018). Action research is relational, with participants being active in the research process as either consultants of the direction of research or, at times, being fully identified as co-researchers (Bradbury et al., 2019). For this research, the education team were active and strong collaborators and were included in the coding process following each art exercise that aided in the design phases. The education team being brought into the coding process was an integral partnership, as it allowed for both insider (the education team) and outsider (me) to work collaboratively to review the data from both the "familiar" and the "strange" lenses (Reed, 2006, p. 83).

The need to include the education team insider insight was evident at multiple points of data collection. Their contributions of knowledge as it pertains to child presentation was key to better interpret non-verbal messages. For instance, assessing young children's level of assent to

participate in research is challenging and is often not adequately secured (Massetti, et al., 2017). However, during the assent exercise, the education team was able to offer valuable insight that grew my understanding of the level of commitment offered from the children.

> Researcher: I noticed they were quiet while I was reading (the assent comic). Do you think that might be an indicator that they were listening to what I was reading?
>
> Ms. Elden: Oh yeah. And the girls who were all sitting on the bench can typically get caught up with playing with each others hair and not pay any attention (laughs). I think maybe the proximity of us helped. Like if we were sitting where you were and not next to them, that might have changed things. But, even Kayce stayed the whole time. That's impressive.
>
> Ms. Kent: And, Greer and the "Where's Doug" thing. That really caught (them). (Greer) was invested. They (all children) were all either watching you or the screen.

The insight offered by Ms. Elden aided in the understanding of what I was seeing from the children. Kindergarten students staying quiet during a reading exercise can be interpreted in a number of ways, however in knowing the children, Ms. Elden was able to provide an interpretation that was informed through past experiences to indicate the kindergarten students' attention to the exercise. Her note on proximity also provided early consideration for categorizing the data.

Partnering with the research team had particular significance when analysing the children's artwork, as the teaching team was able to utilize the children's artwork as a bridge to their deep understandings of kindergarten students and how their actions might influence their relationships with the children. As the following example demonstrates, a conversation that began by reviewing a child's artwork expanded to include consideration of various messages the education

team deliver and how those messages might be interpreted by the child and other kindergarten students in the class.

Researcher: Do you ever think that you are delivering additional messaging around connecting with them? Your connection to them?

Ms. Elden: Yeah, I guess I never really, in those instances, I never would, I never particularly thought about that. But, I can see that obviously, I'm connecting with them. A different kind of connection.

Researcher: How so?

Ms. Elden: Well, this was more of a redirect. Redirecting, and trying to solve a problem, as opposed to like, praising something that was already succeeding or . . .

Ms. Kent: So, from Kal's point of view, like, you just helped (them). So (Kal) is looking like "thank you for being that person to help me because I didn't know how to handle that situation by myself." Right? Taeo is probably just like "you're not helping me." But, maybe (Taeo) realizes that it is helping (them).

Researcher: How do you think (they would) realize that? What would be the message to Taeo?

Ms. Kent: Well, (Taeo) wants to, like, their goal is to have friends and keep friends. And, the way we maintain relationships is by working together so by (Ms. Elden) helping (Taeo) stay on, like, positive terms with (their) good friend. That would be her helping (Taeo). Yeah. And like, you didn't go in guns blazing in trouble, right?

Ms. Elden: Which could have . . . So I think yes, (Taeo) is seeing a connection because even though we're still trying to redirect it's a positive way. Not just every time like "Taeo," you know, "what are you doing?" again.

A final highlight to bringing the education team into the role of co-researcher was their ability to guide the selection process for caregiver interviews.

Ms. Kent: I feel like, um, in terms of parents, Greer's mom and dad are really, really, aware and great. Like, easy to talk to. (Greer was) just diagnosed with level one autism.

Researcher: Oh, (Greer) got that diagnosis?

Ms. Kent: Yeah. So like, they have a lot of insight into their kid.

Researcher: Yeah?

Ms. Kent: Kal's parents I found after the (parent/teacher) interview . . . (Kal) is an only child and when we were like bringing up that, you know, (Kal) is physically violent with kids sometimes, they were to kind of just like, like, kind of shrugged it off. Or like, it was, I don't know. I got a weird . . . it was very strange.

Researcher: Was it kind of like a “boys will be boys” kind of thing or, what do you think that was?

Ms. Kent: I don't know. Maybe? Maybe (they don’t have) much to compare it to? Yeah, I think they're just like, that's their norm. I’m like “no, it’s not” (laughs).

Researcher: Okay. Yeah. So probably Greer’s parents.

Ms. Kent: I find them way easier to talk to, for sure.

From the excerpt above, Ms. Kent was able to offer helpful context in my decision in selecting caregivers that are likely to add more to the interpretation of their child’s art. To make the decision in isolation, I might have understood Kal’s caregivers and Greer’s caregivers as objectively equal to the possibility in aiding in my interpretation of their respective child’s art.

However, Ms. Kent offered valuable insight in to both familial presentations, including ease of communicating with them and depth of insight I might secure by connecting with them.

Member Checking Emerging Themes.

To increase levels of trustworthiness (Govender, 2021) and validity (Hochstrasser Fickel et al., 2017) in this Appreciative Inquiry, member checking was employed in two unique ways across the study. First, interpretations of the kindergarten students' artwork were explored with the children themselves immediately following each art exercise. The child participants were engaged in a draw-and-tell process that offered two means of expression for the kindergarten students to explore concepts of safety and care while at school: (1) visual expression through artwork and, (2) verbal expression via exploring and explaining the contents of the artwork to limit opportunity to misinterpret the visual expression (Wiseman et al., 2018). Figure 4 offers an example to illustrate the combination of visual expression followed by the member checking exercise of verbal confirmation.

During the first art activity, I was handed the picture in Figure 4 by student Kal. In their first offering, there were two persons drawn in the picture.

Researcher: Oh, is that you and me? What are we doing? This is you. What are we doing?

Kal: You're running to catch me because I am running to jump off the high cliff.

Researcher: Oh, I see. Can you add somebody to this picture?

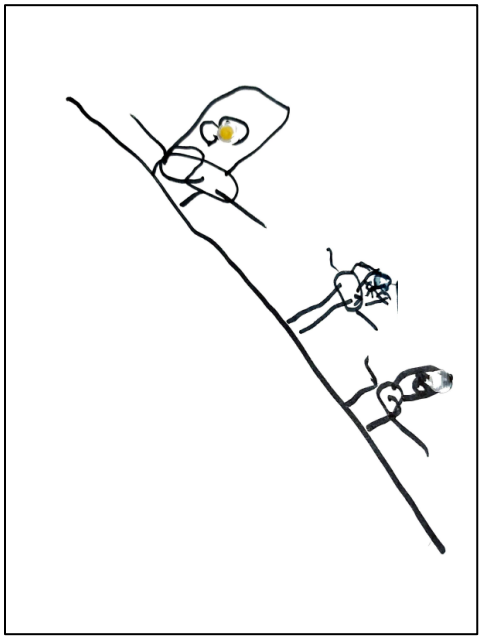
Kal: Sure.

Researcher: Can you add (Ms. Kent) to this picture?

Kal: Yeah.

Figure 4

Kindergarten Student Art: Kal



The art exercises were intended to have the kindergarten students reflect on their needs for safety and care in the school setting and how those needs are met by the education team. As this participant strayed away from the intention of the exercise, the draw-and-tell approach provided an opportunity redirect the child back to the agenda set during the class group definition exercise. Therefore, the kindergarten student was prompted to add the classroom teacher to the drawing. No additional prompts were offered. The student returned with an added figure on the page, positioned in between the caricatures of the child and myself.

> Researcher: I love this. So, is this still me? (Kal nods their head in affirmation) And, is that still you? (Kal nods their head in affirmation) And, is this (Ms. Kent)? (Kal nods their head in affirmation) And, what is she doing?
>
> Kal: I don't know.

Researcher: You don't know? Well, you're about to go off a cliff, right? So, what do you think Ms. Kent is doing?

Kal: Running up the cliff to get some help.

Researcher: Running up the cliff to get you so that you don't go off the cliff or so that you go off the cliff?

Kal: Not go off the cliff.

Researcher: Not go off the cliff? Oh, that's great. Well, thank you.

Although my inclination during my interaction with Kal was to assume that going off a cliff would be understood as a negative prospect by the participant, there was a lot of imaginative aspects included with the children's artwork (e.g., one child participant, Hayden, depicted Ms. Kent as a firefighter who was battling a fire that had the school engulfed in flames). Therefore, checking with Kal offered me an opportunity to ensure my understanding of their art.

The second opportunity to engage in member checking was in the form of triangulating the art data during the semi-structured interviews with the selected caregivers. Collecting primary caregivers' impressions and interpretations of their child's art can not only add additional interpretations of the art (Martin, 2019), it can also act as a broader informative process to research as a whole (Latham & Ewing, 2018). Although caregivers were not part of the art exercise, *checking in* with primary caregivers when children are active participants in research can offer valuable context to the data collected such as cultural considerations and greater characterization of the participants and who they are (Hamilton & De Thorne, 2021). In the following excerpt from a caregiver interview, the caregiver is able to corroborate my impressions of their child's art through their knowledge of their child's personality.

Researcher: So I'm just curious, what are your thoughts on what he created, what he was thinking while we were doing it (the art exercise)? Any thoughts pop in your mind?

Ginny: That the way that Greer explained it to you that, that's (Greer) (laughs). Greer is, (Greer) want to help everybody.

Researcher: Yeah.

Ginny: And I can see that. Like, you explaining (Greer's) drawing, it makes a lot of sense, and that you've just kind of summed up Greer (laughs).

Researcher: What do you think about (Greer's), (Greer's) feeling, like, feeling cared for means feeling helped. Do you see that at home?

Ginny: Oh yes!

Through exploring Greer's art, the caregiver was able to express their sense of how the art aligned with their child's typical presentation. What the caregiver sees in terms of their child's needs for safety and care is being depicted by their child through the art, thus adding to the understanding of the child's needs while at school.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework is one of the most utilized in qualitative studies to analyze data through interpretation and categorization into themes that are important to the research (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Using a standardized approach to processing the data collected increases assurances that findings coming from the study are reliable and consistent with stories the research attempts to share (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). A thematic analysis was selected for this research as there are empirical exemplars that demonstrate its use in both

Appreciative Inquires (Fowler-Davis et al., 2022; Preston, 2017) and qualitative studies that are informed through art modalities (Milasan et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2023).

In analyzing the data, I was particularly cognizant of maintaining a position of reflexivity in my approach. As a novice researcher, specific steps offered in a linear fashion aided in making sense of the analysis process. Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) clearly laid out thematic analysis framework allowed me the opportunity to follow a map of sorts to ensure a level of rigour in the analysis was reached. However, Braun and Clarke (2019) note that thematic analysis should not move in a rigid and linear process. The analysis followed an inductive coding process, where themes were generated through the analyzing process (Swygart-Hobaugh, 2019). As part of the induction of themes, I followed both Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) and Braun and Clarke's (2019) direction of being fluid with the steps needed to be taken to thoroughly analyze the data to discover the themes highlighted below. I allowed the flow of theme generation to develop organically through the 4D cycle process of Appreciative Inquiry. For instance, initial codes were formed (step 2) following the first 3 observations and first art exercise before being presented to the education team. The education team and I reviewed the codes, considering other new or alternate code options, before generating preliminary themes (step 3) and reviewing the themes that we created (step 4). However, before moving on to step 5: defining themes, the study moved into a second cycle of 4D and further data collection. Following 3 more observations and the second art exercise, data was again surveyed to code (step 2) and then those codes searched for themes (step 3). A second review of the themes (step 4) was then conducted, this time with the support of NVivo software. This process is thoroughly explored below.

A reflexive thematic analysis should not be presented or conceptualized as a means of moving away from researcher subjectivity in generating themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The

"story of patterns of shared meaning" (Braun & Clarke, p. 592) that is presented in this chapter, and that informs the results presented in Chapter 5: Discussion below, is built from a theoretical position of attachment and social constructivism (see Chapters 1 and 2) and was engaged through a study built as a creative appreciative inquiry (see Chapter 3). Through this, the themes below reflect such philosophical and procedural elements (all guided by my own assumptions and subjectivities) just as they reflect the patterns in the data themselves.

Cycle 1.

Data collection began with a semi-structured interview with the education team. Meeting with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden offered an opportunity for us to define our roles within the data collection and analysis portion of this study; identifying education team co-researchers when analyzing data pulled from the observations and art exercises. Taking the time to clearly define the roles we were to undertake was an essential preliminary step prior to additional data being collected as it aided in the education team's investment in the study (Coleman & Wiggins, 2017) and would prove to aid in the future rapport building I would need to engage in with the children (Tezcan-Unal, 2018). The interview also allowed for the utilization of the education team's many experiences with the kindergarten student participants (Xerri, 2018) that both (a) confirmed the direction of the research as being aligned with the needs and interests of the classroom (Reed, 2006) and (b) identified any foreseeable hurdles or obstacles that may present themselves in the data collection process (Gallagher et al., 2019). Engaging the education team in this initial dialogue allowed us to collectively define terms such as "safe" and "cared for," placing these phrases in the context of children being in the formal education system. In doing so, our three separate views of the research direction were constructed into one vision for the study (this is in keeping with the constructed reality principle of AI research, Martyn et al., 2019).

Observations were conducted to offer a latent level of data to contribute to theme generation (Braun & Clarke, 2019, note the benefits to combining semantic and latent coding practices). I attended the classroom on three separate occasions for approximately 1 hour in duration (60 minutes, 58 minutes, and 54 minutes). For each observation, focus was concentrated primarily on Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden's interactions with the 12 kindergarten student participants. However, observations at times included non-participating kindergarten students, classroom educational assistants, or other guests of the classroom. Although including non-participants was unavoidable given the kindergarten classroom environment, observations were only recorded and used in the coding process if (a) one or both of the education team *and* (b) one or more of the participating children were actively involved in the event being observed. Observations were audio/video recorded using a stationary laptop running the Zoom software program. Handwritten notes were also taken during each observation exercise, with wonderings and initial thoughts added to the margins as a means of pre-coding (Saldaña, 2021). Each observation's handwritten notes were transcribed into a dedicated electronic document before reviewing the audio/video file of that same observation. Any additional observations gleaned from the video files were added to the corresponding handwritten notes electronic file to form one consolidated and detailed observation document per observation. During this process, my initial thoughts that were included in the handwritten notes were expanded on to included wonderings of future codes, categories, and themes. The below excerpt illustrates a documented observation.

> 9:40am: Along her classroom travels, Ms. Kent spots something on her desk that catches her attention. The desk is situated near the back of the classroom, in front of the door that leads to the teacher's office. It's a larger table in a semi-circle shape, yet it is as low to the ground as all the other tables in the classroom. Kindergarten

student Greer walks up to Ms. Kent, interrupts her focus on the papers on the desk, and asks “did you know pumpkins have skins?” Greer’s eyes shift quickly from Ms. Kent, to the floor, to a colorful display of papers stuck to the wall behind the teacher’s desk that portray the life cycle of a pumpkin. Ms. Kent, without answering Greer’s question, asks “did you plant your own seeds?” Greer, eyes now shifting quickly and frequently from Ms. Kent to the display and back again, does not acknowledge the question posed and moves to asking their own. “Where’d that go?” pointing to a missing pumpkin picture within the display. “Oh, that must have fallen off” states Ms. Kent in a flat, matter of fact, manner as she walks toward the display. “That’s okay, we’re done talking about pumpkins.” Greer, with no other acknowledgement, walks away.

Researcher notes: I wonder if this is an example being attuned and of co-regulating between Ms. Kent and Greer. Greer’s line of questioning along with their rapid eye movements could be an indication of some level of agitation or anxiety around the missing part of the display. Ms. Kent’s calm and matter of fact response might have been interpreted by Greer that the concern their were feeling is not warranted and so they can move on with their day. Ms. Kent being attuned to Greer’s needs, that is, reading the kindergarten student’s body language as being flustered and needing help to return back to a calm emotional state, displays the skill of co-regulation. Greer did not revisit the topic for the rest of the observation period, perhaps an indicator that Ms. Kent’s response satisfied the Greer’s need to explore the topic and a feeling a calm.

The above example offers an observation of an interaction between Ms. Kent and a kindergarten student participant, Greer. Observing the event generated some curiosity as to the potential implications in what Ms. Kent demonstrated to the child (Research Question 1) and how that child's needs were being met (Research Question 2). These curiosities were documented to later inform the coding process.

The first art exercise occurred 2 days after the third observation and was comprised of three parts, beginning with a researcher-facilitated discussion that included the whole class. The purpose of this discussion was to engage the child participants in co-constructing definitions of the terms "safety" and "care," two factors that aid in building of Internal Working Models in children. The final two parts of the art exercise were the "draw" and "tell" portions. Once safety and care were collectively explored by the class, the children immediately engaged in a visual arts creation activity. Using a visual medium of their choosing, the arts exercise was individually executed with the intent to depict an example of safety or care that each child experienced while at school. Once the kindergarten students completed their art, they delivered their art to me and described what they had created. Descriptions were recorded and transcribed via the software program Otter.ai. Coding data collected from the art exercise was unique, in that draw-and-tell delivers both semantic (the participants' description on their art) and latent (the art itself) offerings to analyze.

> Ms. Kent: The door I actually find, I find the door, Taeo's, interesting because we are always talking about like, since day one of when school started, we talked about the kids in our class that we need to keep safe because they are runners. So, we need to keep our doors shut. And, if you see the door open, you need to go shut it for us or tell an adult. If you see one of those kids go out the door and we're not with them,

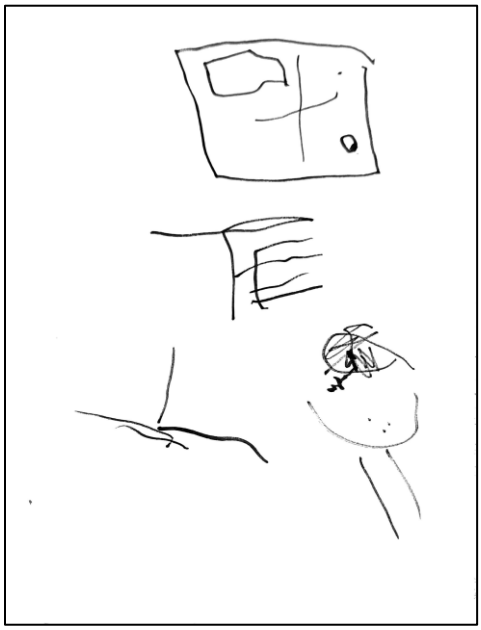
you need to tell us right away. So, they're very trained to be like “Kal just went out the door.” So for Taeo to draw a door I'm like that's pretty good. Like, we're keeping everyone safe by keeping our door shut and watching that kids don't leave.

Ms. Elden: Yeah. And that was a theme that we talked about on the carpet too before we went to the art.

Taeo’s art (Figure 5) portrays them standing by the classroom door. In their “tell” portion of completing the exercise, I asked Taeo to describe what was happening in the picture. Taeo stated “I am not going out the door” and “I know where it is safe to go.” The combination of Taeo’s art and their description of that art offered a fuller story as to what is important to Taeo while at school to feel safe. The added context provided by the education team in the transcript above deepened the understanding even further and was the next data collection method employed.

Figure 5

Kindergarten Student Art: Taeo



Prior to attending the interview with the education team, I reviewed the audio recordings and transcripts while reviewing the products of art as a continuation of pre-coding. The semi-

structured interview with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden was broken into two sessions to accommodate their schedules, for a combined total of 69 minutes. The interview was transcribed by Otter.ai and followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix D for the interview questions). As noted above, the interview acted as a mechanism to explore steps 2, 3 and 4 of thematic analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). A systematic approach was taken to present the data and pre-coding to the education team. First, we began with a review of a single piece of art along with the corresponding draw-and-tell feedback offered by the child artist. This permitted the education team to begin to become familiar with the data (step 1) and to consider how each piece of art was pre-coded as an exercise to generate the initial codes (step 2). Next, observations notes were reviewed. The notes were also coded and we began to link the observations to what was presented in the art to build preliminary themes (step 3).

Reseacher: (Gatlan) drew this sun as well.

Ms. Kent: Mmm Hmm.

Researcher: And, when I asked (Gatlan) to elaborate, (they) just kind of shook (their) head.

Ms. Elden: Right (laughs).

Ms. Kent: (Gatlan) is our very shy kid.

Researcher: Yeah. But I mean, through some of the observations, it was really cool to see what you all did. Even, I guess, almost adapting to (Gatlan's) shyness.

Ms. Kent: Mmm hmm.

Researcher: So, there was one example of you wanting to take (Gatlan's) picture with the cell phone. And (Gatlan) was, (Gatlan's) initial reaction was, (they) shook

(their) head. And, so instead of, kind of like "okay, well, here's the shy kid, so you know, it's hard for me to do anything with (them)."

Ms. Elden: Mmm Hmm.

Researcher: You pause, you took the time, you said, "here, here's what the phone looks like. Here's what it would look like with you on it."

Ms. Elden: Oh right, yeah.

Researcher: There was no rushing around (Gatlan's) reservation.

Ms. Elden: Yeah, and with (Gatlan). If this was, I don't know when you talk to parents, but like, if you were to talk to a mom, you'd probably get so much more out of (the art) because (Gatlan) would be uncomfortable. (Gatlan) would, (they) seem to express a lot at home.

From the above excerpt, the organic flow of the educator interview is evident. The art prompted Ms. Kent to highlight the kindergarten student's typical presentation in the classroom (i.e., shy and reserved) and this moved the conversation into reviewing an observation of a time when Ms. Elden was witnessed adapting her approach with a child to meet their need of moving into the picture exercise cautiously. The dialogue continued to also include wonderings of a potential fit for a future parent interview (part of step 4 and reviewed in detail below).

The conversations with the educators were not linear. The general approach to the dialogue was systematic in beginning with an art piece, offering the corresponding narrative provided by the kindergarten student, and pulling in observations to begin to construct themes. However, as coding continued and themes seemed to be generating, the education team and I moved in and out of other examples provided in the data that either reinforced, or put into question, the themes

we were creating (step 4). The interview culminated with the identification of three themes: closeness, attention, and presentation.

During the education team's semi-structured interview, caregivers of three child participants were identified to request an interview to further explore their child's art. The purpose of engaging with the caregivers was to collect their impressions and interpretations of their child's art to be included in the informative process to the study and, in doing so, gain a deeper understanding of all the children's voices (Latham & Ewing, 2018). One caregiver was unable to be reached (attempts were made via email and telephone). Semi-structured interviews were carried out individually with the other two caregivers. For interview questions, please see Appendix D. Interviews were conducted via the videoconference platform Zoom and transcribed by the software Otter.ai. Each interview was 20 minutes in length. In connecting with the caregivers, as is highlighted with the below excerpt, I was able to both triangulate the information gleaned from the art (Martin, 2019) as well as review the particular theme the education team and I had placed that information within (step 4 in the thematic analysis process, Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Researcher: You sure do like blocks?

Sunny: Yeah,

Researcher: That's awesome. Okay, I'm going to ask your mom if she sees anything here that she might want to pick up on or tell me about.

(Silence)

Researcher: And, it's quite okay if there is nothing, it's quite fine.

Sarah (Sunny's caregiver): Ah, well, they look happy. Are they happy Sunny?

Sunny: Uh huh.

Sarah: Yeah? Are they friends?

Sunny: Yeah.

Sarah: Yeah? That's good. Alright go see what they (Sunny's siblings) are watching.

Researcher: I think you did an excellent job. Yeah. So, I'm going to stop sharing (my screen) now. And, so, a couple of things came out. So, one, you should know that Sunny isn't in a category or a theme all to (themself).

Sarah: (Laughs), okay.

Researcher: (Laughs), yeah, so they're, it's a really good thing, right? And so, we kind of thought and wondered about placing (Sunny's) idea and (their) art into a different category, but we liked the idea and want to explore with you the idea of play. And, if that if that seems to be a common thing with you and with Sunny and your bond with each other that it seems like, you know, Sunny is comfortable or maybe almost like, at (their) best emotionally when you guys are connecting and playing.

Sarah: Yeah, I think that's fair.

Researcher: Is it, Yeah? Do you have any example that you want to share with me around that?

Sarah: Umm, like I know when I come home from work or Sunny comes home from school, it's usually (they) want to show me (their) library books or (their) report from school and (Sunny) is very excited to share with me. And then, (Sunny) usually jumps right into "mommy, let's go play." So, we'll try blocks or cars or whatever and the thing of the day is (laughs). (Sunny) just likes that like one-on-one attention and cuddles and playtime.

The child participant Sunny joined for a portion of the interview. This allowed for the caregiver to not only offer her own thoughts about the art that Sunny created, she was also able to directly check in with Sunny in regards to the accuracy of the interpretation (furthering the member checking process, Wiseman et al., 2018). The caregiver supported the impressions the education team and I held about the art and, through providing a home-based example, reinforced the connections we had made between the act of play and emotional connection.

Cycle 2.

Completing the caregiver interviews signaled the end of the first 4D cycle in the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process. As a form of Participatory Action Research, AI is utilized to in research to both highlight findings of positive aspects of the participants and environment being studied as well as to "take action" and to apply those findings (Tezcan-Unal, 2018, p. 646). Through the semi-structured interview in Cycle 1, the education team was now aware of (a) what they might be doing in the classroom to increase kindergarten students' feelings of safety and care (Research Question 1) and (b) what needs might be presented by kindergarten students in respect to their feelings of safety and care (Research Question 2). Therefore, engaging in a second cycle of AI provided the opportunity to deepen the understanding of attachments forming between educators and children with data now informed by the educators' ability to take action with the information gleaned from Cycle 1.

Cycle 2 began in the same manner as Cycle 1; with three observations to offer a latent level of data to contribute to theme generation. I attended the classroom on three separate occasions for approximately 1 hour in duration (57 minutes, 59 minutes, and 56 minutes). Focus for each observation was again centred primarily on the teacher and ECE's interactions with the 12 kindergarten student participants however, like the first set of observations, non-participating

children were also observed. Inclusion of non-participants were, once more, only recorded and used in the coding process if (a) one or both of the education team *and* (b) one or more of the participating kindergarten students were actively involved in the event being observed. Observations were again audio/video recorded using a stationary laptop running the Zoom software program while handwritten notes were also taken. Replicating the process in Cycle 1, each observation's notes were transcribed into a dedicated electronic document before adding any additional observations pulled from the audio/video file of that same observation.

Following the sixth and final classroom observation, the kindergarten student participants engaged in a second art exercise. Offering the children a second opportunity to build their definition of what safety and care are to them before entering into a second art exercise provided space to build on the previous activity. The education team shared their observation of the kindergarten students' ability to grow the knowledge they are previously built in Cycle 1.

Ms. Kent: I feel like they understood it a little better.

Ms. Elden: Yeah, I think so too. I think they were more engaged in it.

Ms. Kent: I mean, you'll be able to tell us, in the art but, they seem to have a better understanding of what they were supposed to be coloring.

Researcher: What do you think that is?

Ms. Elden: I think it's that we revisited it. Right? So, we are talking about it a second time second time.

The art activity followed the same process as the one they completed in Cycle 1; beginning with a group activity with the whole class to further define concepts of "safety" and "care." The kindergarten students then moved to the tables stationed around the classroom to once again create a piece of art to visually express the ideas generated as a whole group. The exercise was

completed at the end of the day, and the dismissal of children interrupted some opportunities for them to complete the "tell" portion of the draw-and-tell exercise, with children electing to, instead, run to get their outdoor clothing on. The education team aided in taking some of the "tell" statements, however they too seemed to be at the mercy of the kindergarten students' readiness to leave school for the day. Therefore, some of the tell components of this exercise were completed by children *telling* the educators about their art, and then the educators relaying the message and *telling* me. No audio recording was completed during this portion of the exercise.

In moving through Cycle 2, the added element of the previous cycle's information offered an additional layer of consideration for completing the data collection. As Braun and Clarke (2019) note, qualitative data analysis is about subjective story telling. Entering into the observations of Cycle 2, and then engaging in another art exercise with the kindergarten students, was like viewing a sequel to a film. My hope was to see a new story unfold (in Cycle 2) while appreciating that it is informed by the previous story observed (Cycle 1). To continue with Cycle 2 in a reflexive way, I had to be truthful to myself that what I was seeing is now being guided by my past observations and interview discussions, and that these experiences inevitably form assumptions that I must now explore (Braun & Clarke, p. 592). Of particular interest, as it relates to the third step in the thematic analysis process, was the emerging desire I felt to divide the closeness theme into two: proximity and touch.

I met with the education team following the art exercise in the form of another semi-structured interview to review the data collected in Cycle 2. The interview was broken into 3 meetings that, combined, was completed in 96 minutes. During the interview, I broached the idea of proximity and touch replacing the previously agreed to theme of closeness.

Researcher: Do we think it might be something new? What do you think?

Ms. Kent: Hmm.

Researcher: And, if not proximity, maybe a different theme that we've already created?

Ms. Kent: I'm not really sure. Like, because proximity does not have to be touching. So, I think proximity would be good. Like, we're always there.

Researcher: Yeah, we noticed that the first time right? Like, touch was something completely separate.

Ms. Kent: I would say proximity would probably be the best.

Researcher: So, something like "if they can see me, they're close enough to me."

Ms. Kent: Yeah.

Ms. Elden: Like that would look a little different. If we went into the gym, where it's so big. Or, we went outside, it wouldn't necessarily feel, yeah, close.

As the education team and I moved through the observation and art data, as is illustrated in the above excerpt, we began to appreciate the term "close" might not capture a key element in addressing the need for children to feel safe at school. At times, children seek out touch or to be close to their school caregivers. However, during other times, as noted by Ms. Elden, being present but not necessarily "close" also serves a need. The final interview with the education team concluded with agreeing to replace the closeness theme with the two new themes of proximity and touch and we identified caregivers to be contacted to explore the second round of art.

Four caregivers were selected for the second round of caregiver interviews. Selection of the number of caregivers, and what caregivers would be interviewed, was guided by multiple

factors including how the art was coded and within what themes they were placed. The education team also utilized insider knowledge to inform the selection process regarding concerns of interpersonal communication (i.e. have previous interactions with the caregiver been warm and receptive) and responsiveness (i.e. level of difficulty in past attempts to connect with the caregiver). Interviews were completed in 17, 20, 24, 27, and 52 minutes. Similar to the first set of caregiver interviews, the purpose of the interviews was an effort to further triangulate multiple themes that were generated (step 4 in the thematic analysis process, Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Completing the Analysis with NVivo.

Thematic analysis was concluded through the use of the NVivo software program. Qualitative data analytical software such as NVivo has been utilized in previous Appreciative Inquiries citied in the literature to further validate initial codes and themes (Fowler-Davis et al., 2022). Transcripts of all observations (including all handwritten notes), the first draw-and-tell exercise, semi-structured interviews with the education team, and semi-structured interviews with the caregivers were inputted into the software program and reviewed for additional coding opportunities or emerging themes. Utilizing NVivo provided another layer that aided in assessing the generated themes' reliability and alignment with the purpose of the study (Allsop et al., 2022). Transcripts were reviewed one by one in chronological order, beginning with the first observation of Cycle 1. Continuing the reflexive process of thematic analysis, codes identified initially through the education team interviews were highlighted and reassessed in their contribution to formulating the themes while the data was also read through once more to consider additional coding options. Analysis concluded following the NVivo review as no further themes were gleaned from the coding process nor any contradictions to the generated themes identified.

Theme 1: Physical Proximity

I think maybe the proximity of us helped. Like, if we were sitting where you were and not next to them, that might have changed things.

Across the multiple methods of data collection arose a theme of educator and kindergarten student being physically close to one another. As noted above, the education team and I first understood this phenomenon broadly as closeness. Indeed, there are other researchers who have paired proximity and touch into one definition (see Magro et al., 2023). However, as we continued to interact with the data it became clear that the two concepts were distinct and contributed to exploring the topic of the study in unique ways. The literature indicates that the physical closeness of a caregiver as it relates to where they are in proximity to the child provides the child with a sense of safety and security (Bei et al., 2022). In defining the term proximity as it relates to the topic of attachment in the school system, Rea et al. (2016) pulled acts of physical touch out of the definition to leave actions such as maintaining a flexible yet close distance to the educator, a child's awareness of the educator's location in a shared environment, and children closing the distance between themselves and the educator when upset or needing help. The authors went on to note that the frequency and length of time kindergarten students experience that physical closeness with their school caregivers contributed to a sense of safety.

The connection the educators made between being close to the kindergarten students and the children's ability to maintain a level of calm while being attentive to instruction was made clear even before the first observation in the classroom was conducted. As I sat with the education team to complete the first semi-structured interview with them, we engaged in a conversation regarding the assent exercise with the kindergarten students (for more information

on the assent exercise, please see Chapter 3: Methodology above). During the discussion, Ms. Kent noted observing the children being attentive to me while I explained the research to them.

> Ms. Kent: Yeah, it's hard to keep their attention and you had their attention so that is something.
>
> Researcher: How do you know I had their attention? What were they showing you?
>
> Ms. Kent: They weren't rolling around (laughs).
>
> Researcher: Like physically?
>
> Ms. Kent: Yeah (laughs). They weren't poking each other, giggling.
>
> Ms. Elden: No one asked to go to the washroom. No one left the carpet.
>
> Ms. Kent: Yeah.
>
> Researcher: I noticed they were quiet while I was reading. Do you think that might be an indicator that they were listening to what I was reading?
>
> Ms. Elden: Oh yeah. And the girls who were all sitting on the bench can typically get caught up with playing with each others hair and not pay any attention (laughs). I think maybe the proximity of us helped. Like if we were sitting where you were and not next to them, that might have changed things.

The above excerpt offered a key element to building an understanding of proximity within the context of the participating classroom. In keeping with Magro et al.'s (2023) position that sitting next to kindergarten students increases their feelings of closeness with the teacher, Ms. Elden shares her view that children may have presented as less attentive (i.e. playing instead of listening) and more dysregulated (i.e. rolling around on the ground) if she and Ms. Kent were not sitting closely to them. Ms. Elden's statement does not align with Rea et al.'s (2016) idea of an increase of frequency and duration of being physically close to kindergarten students also

increases attachment. However, the statement sparked the beginning of curiosity with regards to physical closeness and how might the physical location of the education team contribute to children's attachment to them.

Classroom observations posed a unique challenge as compared to the other methods of data collection. During the semi-structured interviews with the education team and various caregivers, I was able to progress the conversations in a relatively linear manner: presenting an observation or art piece, wondering aloud about coding and placing within themes, and then receiving feedback on those wonderings. The art exercises with the kindergarten students, too, gave way to an ability to slowly pull data from the activity: one child and one art piece at a time. Observations however, provided a multitude of information in any one moment. For instance, in the following observation, there are a number of compelling examples of Ms. Elden's actions aligning to the topic of educator-child attachment.

> Observation 4 – 9:43am: Kal slowly slides their puzzle closer and closer to Taeo. Taeo notices and stops building their puzzle to watch Kal. Kal moves their puzzle to be next to Taeo's, picks up a piece and waves it in front of Taeo. Ms. Elden seems to be aware of the tension that again is rising between the two and slowly moves toward them but does not engage. As Taeo raises their voice in frustration, saying "hey," Ms. Elden comes alongside them and kneels down with a slight smile on her face. Taeo begins to complain to the ECE but Kal quickly interrupts. Ms. Elden stops Kal and states "Let Taeo tell me." Her voice was quiet and warm. Kal quiets and Taeo, not finding the words to describe what Kal was doing, says "(Kal) did this" while waving a puzzle piece in the air. Ms. Elden states "okay, it looks like Kal will go play over there now," gesturing towards a bench near the border of the carpet. Ms.

> Elden delivers this message as another child (Greer) comes up to her and begins hugging her. She engages in the hug, rubbing the child's back, while continuing to focus on Kal and Taeo. Kal moves to the carpet without a direct prompt from Ms. Elden and Taeo refocuses on his puzzle. Greer leaves to begin their own puzzle.
>
> 9:45am: Ms. Elden, sitting on a bench and remaining close to Taeo, is approached by Sunny. Sunny hugs the ECE and Ms. Elden reciprocates. They embrace for 25 seconds, while other children come and go showing Ms. Elden toys they are playing with. When not engaged with other kindergarten students, and with Sunny's head resting on her shoulder, Ms. Elden continues to watch Taeo play. Sunny, while still in an embrace with Ms. Elden, points to an activity in a bin they want to begin. Ms. Elden says "okay" and the two let go of each other so that Sunny may go and retrieve the activity. The ECE turns her attention back to Taeo for a moment until she spots Kal running and hopping towards two other children and so stands up and leaves without any mention to Taeo.

In the example above, Ms. Elden was observed offering moments of attending to the children and providing physical touch to them (both attention and touch are explored in themes 2 and 3 below). However, I was equally intrigued by Taeo's progress to become calm after the altercation with their fellow kindergarten student. Seemingly, Taeo was offered very little by Ms. Elden to aid in their process to move through their heightened emotions. Following the initial separation of the two children, it may be perceived as both Taeo and Ms. Elden moved on in their days; with Taeo refocused on their puzzle and Ms. Elden being bombarded with requests for hugs and attention. Yet, with Ms. Elden moving towards the confrontation, kneeling down to get closer to the kindergarten students, and remaining in the close vicinity of Taeo, there are

clear examples of the ECE utilizing proximity to help the children with feelings of being safe moving through the situation and care that Ms. Elden has to see it resolved.

In the example above, Ms. Elden initiated closing proximity to get closer to the two children for the purpose of aiding in diffusing an emotionally heightened situation. According to Ms. Elden during the semi-structured interview in Cycle 2, strategies such as getting close to kindergarten students are intentional. Reflecting on the dynamic between Kal and Taeo, the ECE noted the long concerns with the social dynamic between the two children.

> Ms. Elden: Over the last month or so, maybe longer, there has just been like, some hands-on stuff. Quite a bit at recess. So, which one of them will either cry or end up in anger or . . . So, it's not just your average day. We have to take them down to the office. Obviously parents are talking to (them) about it too. So, I think they're starting to like . . . Kal is picking up like "I don't want to go down that road. I don't want to get in trouble. I'm going to go do this." But, Taeo is not there yet.

As the conversation progressed, I asked Ms. Elden what motivated her to address the specific situation in such a way.

> Ms. Elden: I feel like my first, like, I go to social. Because, we want them both to succeed socially, and knowing that that has been an issue, we're on it. That is a goal for these two, plus a few other kids. We need to help them socially problem solve.

As is exemplified above, the physical closeness between Taeo and Ms. Elden was the result of Ms. Elden's actions in hopes to fulfill a need to support Taeo in their social interactions. Unlike the above example where proximity is led by the educator, at times the physical closeness between the school caregiver and kindergarten student is instigated by the child. Interestingly, the literature does not offer examples that differentiate between educator-initiated and child-

initiated actions of close proximity. However, it was clear in the data that both educator and child-led actions that brought the two of them closer together were present and seemed to serve similar yet not identical goals. In the following example, the Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden reflected on another participant, Sunny, and their need to be close to them.

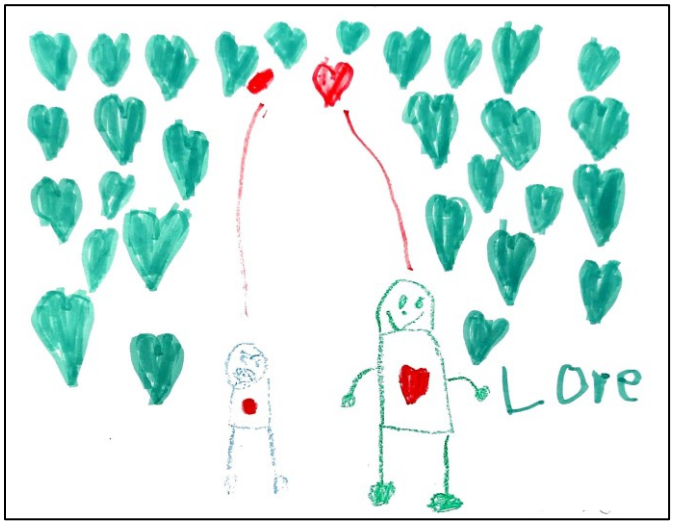
> Ms. Elden: It's funny because the thing is, I don't . . . there's a lot of kids who I can feel on me, or hug me, or something. But, Sunny is not one that I actually think I feel touch from.
>
> Ms. Kent: I don't feel touch a lot from Sunny either, but (they're) always there. (Sunny) is definitely proximity. (Sunny) is constantly checking in a mountain times a day. I have to be like, "Do you need some . . . Do you need something from me?" and (Sunny) will be like "no" (laughs), and I'll be like "okay, (shoulder shrugs and laughs) I just want to make sure."
>
> Researcher: Yeah, I definitely saw that a couple of times. Yeah.
>
> Ms. Kent: "I don't need anything. I'm just standing really close to you and staring at you." (Laughs)

The education team, although unsure of the needs that they are meeting for Sunny, are clear in acknowledging that their presence and closeness to the student is serving some purpose for them and so, the teacher is content to simply be "really close" to the student.

The importance of educators and kindergarten students being physically close to each other was also evident in children's artwork. This is perhaps best exemplified through Greer's artwork that they created during the art exercise in Cycle 2. In Figure 6, Greer drew a picture of himself standing next to Ms. Elden in the centre of the page.

Figure 6

Kindergarten Student Art: Greer

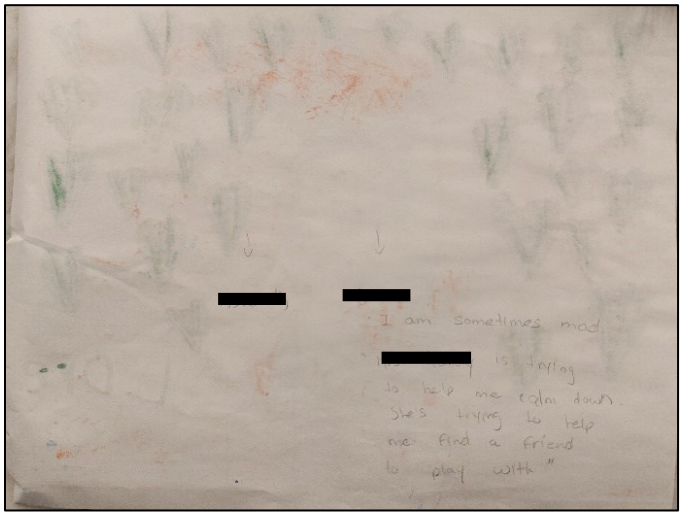


Greer's face in the drawing is frowning, while Ms. Elden's face shows a smile. Green hearts fill in around the two characters with the word "love" written in green to the right of the ECE rendering. Greer's depiction of themself had a red circle in the middle of their chest with a red line connecting their head to a second red dot located at the top of the page. Ms. Elden's character has similar markings, however instead of red dots, there are red hearts. As part of the draw-and-tell exercise, Greer relayed his thoughts regarding his art to the teacher. As can been seen in Figure 7, Ms. Elden scribed Greer's words on the back of their drawing immediately following the kindergarten student's description.

The combination of the description Greer offered in regards to Ms. Elden helping them and the artwork, particularly the two characters standing close to each other in the centre of the page, intrigued me. I explored Greer's art further with the education team during the final semi-structured interview with them.

Figure 7

Kindergarten Student Greer: Art Description Transcribed by Ms. Elden



Researcher: These two are pretty interesting to me. So, both Kal's and Greer's. I wasn't sure. So, for Greer. (Ms. Elden), well, you heard why. Okay, so I won't offer my two cents. I'd like to hear what you both think. If that fits into a particular category.

Ms. Kent: I mean, that's like really helping him regulate his emotions.

Ms. Elden: Mmm Hmm. I think, compartmentalize, is the word I am looking for.

Ms. Kent: Like, (Greer) is like "which feeling is this and how do I navigate it?"

Ms. Elden: A lot of kids don't know that they need help. Greer knows "I need help. I need help regulating myself right now."

Ms. Kent: "I'm so mad right now!"

Ms. Elden: Yeah, whereas others will just be mad and we're trying to figure out what's going on. But, Greer has a sense of "I need somebody to help me with this right now."

Ms. Kent: Which category would fall into? I'm not really sure. I can't remember what they were. (laughs)

Researcher: Well, we have helping as part of proximity. And, I think it was hard.

Ms. Kent: I would think it would go in there. Because doesn't it mean like, we're helping them with lots of things. We're physically helping them like do up a zipper or that we're helping them navigate problem solving and that's part of the kindergarten program. Right? So we're helping in lots of areas.

Ms. Elden: Right, like so thinking because a lot of that stuff happens outside at recess, when (Greer) has to problem solve in certain situations. But, we're not, I'm not the only adult out there. Right. But, (Greer) still . . .

Researcher: Goes to you?

Ms. Elden: Yeah. So, if (Greer) is like . . . any one out there could help (them). But, (Greer) comes to me.

In the above excerpt, the education team understand helping in many forms, yet all forms of helping includes the child (in this case, Greer) being physically close to them. Whether the need is aiding in motor skills (such as the zipper example above) or processing emotions, the kindergarten student will elect to move towards the teacher and ECE to gain the help from them rather than someone else who may be closer in proximity.

The education team's perception of help being connected to emotional regulation and Greer seeking to be close to Ms. Elden as a supporter of them navigating strong emotions was corroborated when the art was reviewed with Ginny, Greer's caregiver.

Ginny: It looks like (Greer) has got the circle in (their) body and the heart in her body and it looks like she is sending her love to (Greer's) anger. Which, would then

come back to (Greer), but not be anger, it would be love. Is what I would get from that.

Researcher: Yeah. Other thoughts? That's it? That's okay. That's really good. And so, you know, I'm just, I'd like to place this back in the context of attachment and relationships. And so, what we were talking about earlier around, you know, what Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden offer in the class. Thinking about terms of safety and care, what does this picture show you that is able to kind of reconnect back to those contexts.

Ginny: So, when Greer is angry or having a hard day, (they) can go to Ms. Elden who has lots of love to give and will give that love to Greer and help (them) in (their) anger to calm down. So (Greer) look's again, (Greer) is looking for the calm in the storm. And for (Greer), that's one of (they're) teachers.

Researcher: Yeah, I love that.

To Ginny, their child being with Ms. Elden offers calm to their emotional storm. When the caregiver reviewed the artwork, they interpreted the red lines, circles, and hearts as Greer's visual expression of how they see their ECE helping them when they are sad; when Greer is with Ms. Elden, she can transfer (or, perhaps demonstrate) her love to Greer.

Theme 2: Touch

If I am on yard duty, she will subtly grab my hand and walk with me. I'll say "don't you want to go play over by the, whatever?" and she'll go "no, I'm good" (laughs).

In the previous theme *proximity*, an example was offered from an interview with the education team where Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden mused (using kindergarten student Sunny as an example) regarding some children needing only to be physically close to them, while other

children “I can feel on me, or hug me, or something.” The phenomenon of the members of the education team coming into physical contact with the kindergarten students shined through the data as it was analyzed. Although there are other researchers who have paired proximity and touch into one definition (see Magro et al., 2023), there are also examples in the literature of researchers highlighting the specific act of touch being essential for building social and emotional bonds between teachers and their students (Bosmans et al., 2020). As will be noted throughout this section, the term touch can encapsulate multiple actions. Across the contemporary examples in the literature, touch can include the teacher holding hands with their student (Murray et al., 2023), hugging or embracing (Rodriguez-Carrillo et al., 2020), a pat on the back (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020), and high-fives (Cheng, et al., 2021). Examples of any physical contact that were intentional and instigated by either a member of the education team or a child were coded and included in the building of the theme of touch.

At the beginning of data collection, I met with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden following the ascent exercise with the kindergarten students. During the semi-structured interview, I asked the education team what factors they thought contributed to building attachment between a caregiver and child. They responded plainly.

Ms. Kent: If they asked you for help, and you do. And, if they ask for a hug, you do.

Ms. Elden: Yeah, like if you shut them down then they probably won’t go to you.

The importance of physical contact with the kindergarten students to build emotional relationships was understood by the education team before any data was collected from the students. To Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden, it was important to be open to the needs of the children. Meeting the kindergarten students needs can at times come from the children initiating physical touch (such as a hug, alluded to in the above quote). Other times, needs may not be overtly

demonstrated by the kindergarten students, prompting the team to exercise proactive means to continue to connect with the children in their classroom.

Ms. Elden: I mean, you can't know what they need all the time.

Ms. Kent: But the little things throughout the day. Like offering a squeeze on the shoulder as you walk by, a smile, a rub on the back.

(Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden laugh)

Researcher: Sorry I missed that while I was typing, did you do something?

Ms. Elden: Yeah I winked. We wink a lot at the kids too, you know, let them know things are okay.

Young children in a school environment benefit from the caregivers using physical contact as a tool for communication (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020). It was clear early into the study that utilizing various forms of touch was a strategy the education team employed to communicate multiple messages to the kindergarten students.

As observations commenced in Cycle 1 of the appreciative inquiry process, there were frequent examples of touch being utilized in the classroom. Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden were observed offering and accepting offers of hugs, permitting children to play and stroke their hair as lessons or other classroom activities progressed, passing by children and administering a gentle rub on the back or quick tickle on the top of their heads without any words exchanged, and inviting or permitting the kindergarten students to sit on their laps. During the third observation, a particular moment stood out to me.

Observation 3 – 2:24 pm: As Ms. Kent finishes reading the book, she asks a couple of questions regarding the story for the kindergarten students to answer. With the answers being delivered by the children shouting out their thoughts, Ms. Kent states

"that gives us a chance to get the wiggles out." No further direction is given but it seems the children understand what this means as they all get up from a seated position and stand in their place on the carpet. A few kindergarten students begin to dance in place. Ms. Kent returns to the laptop to cue up the next activity. As the SMART board warms up, more children are dancing, spinning in place, jumping, and walking around. All remain on the carpet. As the SMART board begins to illuminate, the speakers bellow out "it's a fall time freeze dance." Some of the children attempt to says the words at the same time as the video that is now visible on the screen, creating an echo as they trail behind the speakers. Many of the kindergarten students attempt to get closer to the board, prompting Ms. Kent to direct "back up friends." While the music blares out of the speakers, only few kindergarten students dance along with the teacher as she is modeling her dance after the animated characters on the screen. The Kindergarten students' eyes seem to dart back and forth between their teacher and the screen. As they look to Ms. Kent, the educator swinging and swaying, they too begin to dance as they attempt to copy their teacher's movements. However, as they look back to the screen, most of the dancing stops until they return their gaze to their teacher, which prompts a smile to form on many of their faces as they again sway to the music. The video prompts the children to "freeze." Ms. Kent takes this opportunity to scan the room, perhaps looking for signs of engagement from the kindergarten students as she states "okay I want to see more moving." Hunter, one of the children demonstrating reservation (i.e. body turned away from the screen and the teacher, looking to the floor), hears their teacher's request and looks up to see her again begin to swing as the music begins again. Hunter smiles

> and then laughs as they get a burst of energy and begin bouncing with their arms flailing. Throughout the dancing activity, kindergarten students Sunny and Olsen flank Ms. Kent, both opting to keep eyes on her rather than the screen. Olsen periodically grabs their teacher's hand. Each time, the educator looks down at Olsen, holds Olsen's hand as the swinging of that particular arm becomes much more animated. Olsen smiles slightly, their eyes not leaving the teacher's face with no other parts of their body in motion. Olsen gently pulls their hand back, dropping it to their side and away from Ms. Kent. Olsen continues to watch Ms. Kent as she continues her dance uninterrupted by her hand emptying of Olsen's hand. The sequence of Olsen watching their teacher, grabbing her hand to hold, allowing the educator to swing their arm wildly to then pull their arm back to their own body occurred four times during the 3-minute dance.

Following the observation, as I transcribed my handwritten notes and reviewed the video recording, the dance event offered a lot of data to analyze and process; all occurring within a 3-minute span. Ms. Kent abruptly pivoting away from receiving answers to the questions she posed to the class about the book that was read previously might demonstrate her attuning to the children's needs. That is, the move away from the book activity may have been because of non-verbal messages Ms. Kent perceived in the moment from the kindergarten students to indicate a need to shift to another event. In addition, Ms. Kent demonstrating and leading the dance, with children mirroring her actions, may also indicate attuning to the kindergarten students' needs; understanding the children would respond positively to witnessing their teacher dance and would begin to follow along.

As I reviewed the dance portion of the video recording multiple times, the interaction between Olsen and Ms. Kent became intriguing to me. Olsen presented with an unwillingness to engage in the activity, opting instead to stand and intently watch their teacher lead the class. With the loud volume of the video and their classmates, Olsen looks almost paralyzed standing next to the educator. However, periodically Olsen reached their hand out to the always receptive Ms. Kent. The teacher did not offer much more than the hand embrace to Olsen apart from looking down and making brief eye contact with Olsen each time their hands lock. That eye contact was broken each time with a smile from Ms. Kent as she turned her attention back to scanning the sea of learners in front of her. Although Olsen initiated the hand holding, the kindergarten student also led all times that the hands broke away from each other. Had Olsen not pulled their arm away to release the hold, Ms. Kent seemed prepared to hold Olsen's hand for the entire dance exercise. The recurring event of Olsen leading in holding hands, and leading the end of them as well, seemed to fulfill a need that helped Olsen get through an activity that seemed to have them feeling uncomfortable.

The art activities in both Cycle 1 and 2 began with a classroom activity that I facilitated with the kindergarten students for the purpose of building a pathway to construct the children's concept definitions of the terms "safety" and "care" (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017). Following the exercise the education team was reengaged through another semi-structured interview. During the interview, Ms. Elden reflected on her perception on the children becoming "stuck" on the concept of safety. Although there is literature that connects physical contact to feelings of safety in children (see Yoshida & Funato, 2021), physical touch is more commonly linked empirically to the concept of "care" (see Gulland, 2020; Hedlin & Åberg, 2020; Rodriguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). However unclear as to what need is being fulfilled when educator and kindergarten

student engage in physical contact, the art exercises highlighted the children associating emotional connection to the education team with touch. Participant Hunter offered the education team and me an example of this to reflect on following the first art activity. Being the only child electing to use paint as their art medium, Figure 8 shows Hunter's art, that was indistinguishable to the education team and me.

Figure 8

Kindergarten Student Art: Hunter

As with all children during the art activity, Hunter was prompted to explain their picture as part of the draw-and-tell exercise. With the adults unable to decipher the meaning behind the art through simply looking at the artwork, the draw-and-tell method offered Hunter an opportunity to express themself visually while not undermining their voice contributing to the research. The conversation between Ms. Kent and Hunter that took place as Hunter handed the art to the educator was explored during the subsequent semi-structured interview with the education team.

Researcher: So, I actually have a question. So, you (Ms. Kent) wrote this (I gesture to the word “hugs” written on Hunter’s art),

Ms. Kent: I did, yeah. (laughs)

Researcher: And, you offered this to me. And so, I wasn't around Hunter when (they) did this. But if you can reflect back around the prompting that was offered there. If, we were like, so I need to know, was (Hunter) directed to paint a hug? Or (were they) . . .

Ms. Kent: No

Researcher: No. So, so . . .

Ms. Kent: That was afterwards.

Researcher: So, what was the conversation?

Ms. Kent: It was just like “so, you're going to paint a picture of how you feel cared for.” So, Hunter just started painting.

Researcher: So, Hunter did that (gesturing to the painting) and then you asked Hunter what it was?

Ms. Kent: I said “What is that?” Hunter said “Hugs.” Hugs? Like, “okay. (laughs) I think that's actually a good answer.”

Researcher: Okay.

Ms. Kent: It doesn’t look like hugs but, okay. (laughs)

Ms. Elden: Hunter talks about hugs a lot, and we talk about that as one of (their) tools to make (Hunter) feel better. So, I'm not surprised.

Ms. Kent: The second picture was not a hug. I don't know what the second one is.

Researcher: Oh,

Ms. Kent: Hunter just wanted to paint more. (laughs)

Researcher: Okay, truthfully, I thought it was because it dried it together.

Ms. Kent: Yeah, the second one, I just put underneath because if you pull this first one off, it's "Ahh." It's going to go right onto the table.

Researcher: Yes. Yeah.

Ms. Kent: So, I was like "Let's put a backup page underneath."

Researcher: (Laughs) That's so funny.

In the above excerpt, Ms. Kent noted that Hunter was unprompted to create their picture of "hugs" and, although motivated to move on from the exercise and paint another picture, perhaps on a more preferred topic, Hunter was still able to put into words what they think of when the topic of "care" was presented.

Although Hanna, Hunter's caregiver, was initially selected for a caregiver interview to explore her child's art depicted in Figure 8 above, I did not receive a response to my request to meet. Following Cycle 2's art exercise and educator team interview that followed, Hunter's caregiver was again selected for interview. Interestingly, although Hunter's second art piece was coded within Theme 1: Proximity, their caregiver and I explored the topic of physical contact and its various applications by the multiple carers in Hunter's life.

Like, Hunter and I would walk the dog every day and we didn't walk on busy streets. So, Hunter would like, run ahead and I would, (they) would look back at me and I would be like "you're fine." And then, Hunter would be like "oh, there's a car," and so (they) would know to just get over to the side and stand on the grass. And so, it wasn't ever like a 'grab your hand pull you' situation, whereas Hunter's grandma wants to like, hold (their) hand. And like, you know, be right there and "don't fall, I'll

> catch you." And I'm like, "you can go and you're going to fall, and I'll just be there when you're hurt, and I will cuddle you and give you mommy kisses and we'll be okay" (laughs).

In Hanna's story above, there are examples of touch being used for safety (i.e. Hunter's grandma protecting Hunter from dangerous situations by holding their hand) as well as touch being used for care (i.e. Hanna offering cuddles and kisses when Hunter gets hurt). Considering the latter of the 2, care, Hunter's concise description of their Cycle 1 artwork "hugs" is understandable when placed within the context of Ms. Kent prompting them to create art that shows "how you feel cared for" and Hanna's description of how they have been cared for while at home.

Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept

> *I feel like that happens all the time. They want that verbal recognition. They want that praise. That acceptance piece.*

Both Theme 1: Proximity and Theme 2: Touch connect to the topic of child/educator attachment through physical closeness (theme 1) and contact (theme 2). In many instances, the data demonstrated that moving towards a kindergarten student and/or offering physical touch were deliberate and intentional actions. However, it was also noted that both of these may also be executed without intention (such as simply finding themselves close to the children that incidentally contributed to them demonstrating calm noted in Theme 1: Proximity above) or as proactive measure without consideration of child need (such as offering "squeezes" to offer messages of reassurance noted in Theme 2: Touch above). As data analysis progressed, it was evident that there were many examples of (a) the education team utilizing proximity and touch without connecting to, or being attuned to, the needs of the kindergarten students and (b) the education team demonstrating emotional connection with the children that was primarily tied to

factors that fell outside the physical realm. As a result, a new theme was generated to capture moments and examples pulled from the data that portrayed the educator-kindergarten student bond being formed through the use of direct words, demonstrating interest, exhibiting patience, and presenting as excited.

Theme 3 has three critical components, each building off the previous. The first component, being attentive to the kindergarten students, is educators exhibiting that they interact with the children in their class in a reciprocal way. Within the data, paying attention to kindergarten students looked like engaging in a conversation, asking questions of the children, and otherwise portraying a level of engagement and curiosity in the children's wellbeing and interests. Educators who demonstrate investment in their students, paying attention to and connecting with them, increase the students' own awareness of their mental/emotional state (Regueiro et al., 2022). Moreover, the literature notes that teachers who pay attention to, and so build relationships on, students' unique characteristics contribute to the children feeling safer in the classroom (Rodriguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). As part of attending to students, educators' ability to pick up on the children's needs aids in building strong relationships with them (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). The second component of this theme, being attuned, recognizes that paying attention to the children must also build towards an understanding of needs and interests. The ability to be responsive demonstrates to the students that the educators own a level of understanding, and so competence, to be seen as available attachment figures (Alamos & Williford, 2019; Kearns & Hart, 2017). Lastly, the third component of acceptance, builds on the previous concepts of attention and being attuned to their interests by demonstrating those interests are understood, accepted, and appreciated by their educators. Engaging in activities that

children are interested in, particularly with regards to play activities, helps children and educators define their relationship positively (Alamos & Williford, 2019).

The education team and I discussed attending, and being attuned to, the various needs of all the kindergarten students when we met for the first semi-structure interview.

> Ms. Elden: Well, and I am new to the SK kids. But (non-participating kindergarten student), who takes a long time to come around, (they're) even holding my hand.
>
> Researcher: That's interesting. So, the (non-participating kindergarten student) example. I am picturing the "Circle of Security" visual, you know? Where the child goes out and explores but then comes back in to recharge before they go out again. Is (non-participating kindergarten student) an example of that or do you have other examples there?
>
> Ms. Kent: I feel like that happens all the time. They want that verbal recognition. They want that praise. That acceptance piece. I see that at recess a lot. They circle back in. Asher gets random little hugs and then (they are) good to go. Olsen also checks in. Avery, who is very sensitive. I mean, (they) cry at the drop of a dime. When you reassure (Avery) though, (they) are good to go. (They) wipe those tears away and is like "Okay, I am fine now" (laughs).
>
> Ms. Elden: There's Hunter too.
>
> Ms. Kent: Yeah, Hunter. (They) take longer but still shows that (being able to go back and explore).

Gleaned from the above excerpt, the educators offer a list of needs that they attempt to address with the kindergarten students. Following a reflection of more general terms of attention (e.g. verbal recognition) and acceptance (e.g. praise), Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden begin to pull from

memory specific needs of some children. Their ability to be attuned to those specific needs, being aware of who needs random hugs (in the example above, Asher) as compared to who needs verbal reassurance (Olsen) or extra time to return to process (Hunter), allows for building relationships by considering individualized characteristics of each child.

As noted above, educators engaging in play with kindergarten students acts as a tool for building stronger relationships between them (Alamos & Williford, 2019). Through the observations, it was clear that when the educators interacted with children through play, they were able to demonstrate attention, attuning, and acceptance.

> Observation 2 – 12:28pm: Ms. Elden walks over to the carpet and asks the near by Educational Assistant (EA) "are there any bears in the den?" "Yep" the EA responds. "Hibernators." They both chuckle. Ms. Elden asks "how many bears are in the den?" "Two." "Two?" asks Ms. Elden. "We have two bears in the den right now?" The ECE walks over to the opening of the box and begins to engage with the two *bears*. "Do you have lots of bedding for hibernation in there?" "Did you work hard to make your den comfy?" As Ms. Elden engages the two children in the box, more come and begin to close in on the box opening. There are seven students that glance back and forth between looking into the den and Ms. Elden continuing her imaginative play with her two *bears*. One of the kindergarten students watching Ms. Elden is Hunter, who doesn't wait long before entering the box. Two other children who try to follow Hunter in but Ms. Elden stops them to say "Hunter's first, okay?" Ms. Elden continues to talk to the bears in the den, all of whom seem to smirk when Ms. Elden calls them "bears." There seems to be lots of bears coming in and out of the den now as Ms. Elden stands up from her knees and walks away.

> Shortly thereafter, Ms. Elden heads back to the bears' den. Hunter, who brought a large building block structure into the den, holds it out to show Ms. Elden. The ECE crouches down just outside of the den and says "I am worried this isn't safe. Are you done building with these?" Hunter's response is inaudible however it seems they are not willing to give up their block structure yet. Ms. Elden decides to engage Hunter further by asking "what is this? Tell me about it." Hunter begins to describe the structure to her. Hunter says, "it's red, it's my favourite shape." Ms. Elden probes a little "so, red is your favourite shape?" Hunter confirms the statement before Ms. Elden again asks them to put the block structure away. This time, Hunter complies with no hesitation.

The bears' den was a large, repurposed refrigerator box that was painted in different colors of brown and green and placed in the centre of the classroom where interested children would crawl in and out of large opening. Some of the children would act as bears, crawling and growling, while others seemed simply content to bring toys into the den. Before Ms. Elden engaged in the imaginative play, there were but two children in the den. As Ms. Elden began to play with those kindergarten students, many more children moved towards the den to join the play, including Hunter. The kindergarten students visibly responded positively to the ECE's play as they smiled when called "bears."

It is unclear of the impact the play had on the later interaction with Hunter regarding removing the block structure from the den. However, the observation above highlights additional examples of Ms. Elden attuning to Hunter's needs. As was noted in my handwritten notes that documented my thoughts during the observation, from an academic position, it would have been logical to correct the error Hunter offered in miscategorising red as a shape. However, Ms. Elden

did not do this. In addition, if Ms. Elden approached her concern from a more behavioural approach, she might have pressed Hunter to remove the block structure from the den. Though, she did not do this either. Instead, the ECE accepted Hunter's responses and attended to their interest in the structure they built. The approach Ms. Elden took with Hunter is in keeping with what she noted in the semi-structured interview (indicated above) regarding Hunter's need for extra time to process. As such, the observation above is a strong example of Ms. Elden being attuned to Hunter and how she has learned from past interactions of what works for Hunter.

The importance of feeling they are seen and having attention paid to them by the education team through the act of play was also evident in the kindergarten students' art they created for the study. In one example, Figure 9, participant Asher depicted themself closing the classroom door with the education team watching.

Figure 9

Kindergarten Student Art: Asher

It is difficult to see the link in Asher's art to the feeling and value of attention being paid to them. Through their description of the art during the draw-and-tell portion of the exercise, I came to understand the picture above to be Asher closing the door and the education team watching, yet there was still no explicit link between the art and attention. The semi-structured interview conducted with Asher's caregiver however, offered added context to Asher's decision to draw them being observed by the educators when prompted to depict their thoughts on the concepts of "safety" and "care."

> Researcher: So, I'll be transparent here that Asher was a little bit aloof, when I asked (Asher) to describe what (they) created. Asher kind of just wanted to hand it off and run away.
>
> Annie: Okay (laughs).
>
> Researcher: I was able to rope Asher in a little bit and get (them) to let me know that this is (Asher) closing the door and Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden are watching that. So yeah, I would assume that this is (Asher) on the left and that maybe we have a couple of other people here. And maybe they're not actually even depicted on the page. But, the door being closed, I'm guessing here.
>
> Annie: Yeah. So, it's interesting. So, I've been in the classroom before, like volunteering, and I know that keeping the door is a big thing in that room because it does keep, it keeps the students safe because there's some who run, right?
>
> Researcher: Yeah.
>
> Annie: And so, I could see why Asher would paint something like that, keeping the door closed, because that keeps one of (their) best friends who's (non-participating

child) safe. Right? And probably then when the door is closed, like that's a safe place inside that classroom. It's the environment that (they) know, right?

Researcher: It's interesting that (Asher) presented (themself) as that person who creates the safety and care.

Annie: Asher very much sees (themself) as like a helper or an advocate for (non-participating child) especially, because (Asher) sees like, I know (they've) done comments, said comments before and was like, "Oh, well, I wonder if (non-participating child), is going to be at school today and I'm going to have to help (them) with everything." But Asher chooses to do that, and (they) enjoy doing it. And, that's like, how (Asher) shows (their) love for (non-participating child) is by helping (them) with (their) chair and with, you know, whatever (their) needs are. Yeah, so that's pretty cute (laughs).

Researcher: It is very cute. Now Asher also mentioned that Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden are watching (them) close the door. Any thoughts on that?

Annie: Maybe in (Asher's) mind they see that (they) help. You know, they see that, you know, Asher is an active part of the, you know, the classroom by taking part in the act of closing the door.

Researcher: How do you think that would relate to (Asher)? Like Asher feeling safe and cared for?

Annie: Oh, probably they're watching because they, you know, they pay attention. So that's speaks to, probably that (Asher) feels like they have a sense of, you know, what's going on in the classroom and they see things. It's safe, I guess.

Researcher: That Asher is safe because they're watching (Asher)?

Annie: Like (Asher), if Asher knows that they're watching (them), then I would see that as being a good thing because then, like, (Asher) knows that they're paying attention, right? Or being attentive.

Researcher: Oh, okay.

Annie: Right? They see that (Asher) is doing something. Closing the door is a positive thing in that classroom, right?

Researcher: So, it's about the teacher, like the teachers being able to, like, well I'll do air quotes again, I use these too often but, "catch" Asher doing something good.

Annie: For sure. I think that they do, because they also will say things like that to (Asher) and I know that (they) feel proud of that or is happy about that. Because (Asher) is, you know, a helper or, you know, an advocate. Even at (the) report card time, they'll talk about that quite a bit, in front of (Asher) as well. So, (Asher) knows that they see what (Asher) is doing and the positive things (Asher) is doing.

The excerpt above offers an opportunity to connect kindergarten students' receiving attention to both safety and care. From Annie's perspective, Asher closes the door to the classroom to keep their friend safe. The education team watching them help keep their peer safe delivers a message of safety through an understanding that the Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden wish for them to be safe just as they want their friend to be safe. In addition, Asher's caregiver sees attention as being important for Asher. To be recognized for their efforts by the education team elicits a sense of pride and joy in them.

Theme 4: Presentation

> *He tends to look at the adults. And, if the adults are laid back and letting things happen, and he knows that it's okay to be doing those things. That makes him (feel) safe.*

The concept of watching over children to provide messages of safety and care was prominently mentioned and observed throughout the multiple modes of data. Whether it be watching the kindergarten students from close range before intervening on a child disagreement (such as demonstrated during the observation example offered in Theme 1: Proximity), watching for when a child needs to be embraced (as was explored in the caregiver interview example offered in Theme 2: Touch), or the sense of pride a kindergarten student feels for receiving attention for a good deed (just as Asher expressed in their art, with their caregiver adding context, in Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Attend), it is clear that the education team watching the kindergarten students connects to the topic of child/educator attachment. The final theme, too, connects to the idea of watching. However, where the first 3 themes demonstrate how *adults watching children* relate to the children feeling safe and cared for, Theme 4: Presentation shows how *children watching adults* can also influence children's attachment development.

Young children have the ability to read and often interpret emotions in others accurately (Burkitt & Watling, 2016). The opening quote in this section was offered during an interview with Ginny, the caregiver of Greer. The caregiver reflected on Greer observing adults in their life and how those observations influence Greer's feelings of safety. This connection between a caregiver's presentation to those in their care and how those children respond to what they are seeing from those caring for them is observed in the literature (Woods, et al., 2017). Although less frequent, the literature has also captured how kindergarten students interpret relationships

between their peers and the teacher and how the interactions between the two may influence their understandings of their own relationship with the classroom educator (Endedijk et al., 2022). What seems to be absent in the literature is an exploration on the level of awareness educators have in regard to both (a) how their direct interactions with kindergarten students can influence relationships with the children acting only as observers of those interactions and (b) how all learning exercises double as attachment exercises and so presentation of the educators should be reflective of this.

Considering (b) above, Ms. Elden was observed in an academic exercise with Hunter that illustrates the educator building her relationship with the kindergarten student while completing the exercise.

> Observation 4 – 10:11am: As Ms. Kent sits in the rocking chair moving the class through phonics exercises, Ms. Elden walks around the periphery of the carpet observing the children. Then, with a smile and a loud whisper, she calls Hunter while waving her arm to gesture to them to follow her. They do and the two of them move to a back table where the ECE gives Hunter a paper and pencil for them to practice letter writing. No instructions are given, Hunter simply goes straight to work with their best effort to copy the letters they see on the page above. Sunny comes over and Ms. Elden redirects them back to the carpet to review the classroom promise with their classmates. She turns back to Hunter. “Wow, Hunter! I think that’s the best you’ve ever done. Have you been practicing at home?” Hunter responds with a slight head nod and Ms. Elden offers them a fist bump and “good job.” Hunter smiles. They move on to creating patterns. Ms. Elden elects to use shiny colourful stones for Hunter to create patterns with and allows Hunter to lead in selecting what colours

they want to use. Opting for the burnt-orange and navy-blue stones, Hunter begins to place the two colours in line; alternating between blue and orange. Ms. Elden offers no verbal prompts. She leans towards Hunter, resting her head on her hand while watching the creation of a long train of stones. As the orange and blue stones are moved from colour coordinated piles to a sequenced line, Hunter calls out the colour they handle. “Blue.” “Orange.” “Blue.” “Orange.” Once the line is complete, Hunter uses their index finger to review the colours they have put into formation “blue, orange, blue, orange, blue, orange” ending with an emphatic “blue!” as they point to the last stone in the line. The ECE lifts her head off her hand and stretches her hand out, almost in a demonstration of surprise, and states “you created a blue and orange pattern! And, on your very first try!” Hunter, not taking his eyes off his long, colourful creation, says “yeah!” Ms. Elden asks “okay, what colour of pattern do you want to make now?” Hunter decides on the same burnt-orange stones and also selects the pile of stones that are lime-green in colour. They once again begin to build an alternating colour train while calling out the colours. “Green.” “Orange.” “Green.” “Orange.” However, halfway through his pattern, the navy-blue stones catch Hunter’s eye and they begin to add them into their coloured line, disrupting the pattern they initiated. Ms. Elden does not interrupt Hunter. She continues to observe in a calm and quiet manner. When they run out of stones, Hunter again offers a verbal recap “green, orange, green, orange, green, blue, green, blue, orange, blue, blue,” finishing by again raising their voice in triumph “blue!” Ms. Elden reviews Hunter’s creation with them, pausing in the line where they introduced the blue stones and asks, “then what happened?” Hunter states “I made a new pattern” before

> sliding all the blue stones back into a pile in front of him, counting the number of stones out loud. They begin counting all the stones. Ms. Elden does not interrupt. Hunter ends their counting by stating proudly "10!" The ECE, not revisiting the topic of the flawed pattern, asks "can I show you something?" Ms. Elden begins to place the stones in a three colour pattern of blue, green, and orange. Hunter eagerly takes over but does not follow the pattern, opting instead to swoop all the colours together, squishing them into single file with their forearms and paying no attention to colour placement. Ms. Elden smiles and states "okay thank you. You can go now." Hunter runs back to the carpet and joins their classmates.

The primarily academic exercise depicted in the above observation offers an opportunity to consider the event from a position of connection and relationship building. The errors observed by the ECE in terms of Hunter's pattern creation were not corrected. Instead, the educator permitted the exercise to continue to be led by Hunter. This is consistent with the educators as co-learners pedagogical approach in the Ontario Kindergarten Program (2016). However, the uniqueness that can be gleaned from the observation began to shape as I explored it with the education team during the semi-structured interview that followed.

The interview began with me reading the observation above. This had both Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden laughing at the circumstance.

> Ms. Kent: Alright (laughs). Good. I wish all of our stuff was documented. You could write a whole book about it (laughs).
>
> Researcher: Okay, so general thoughts and then I'll read your mind. I'm breaking my own rule here.
>
> Ms. Kent: Umm. You definitely don't like, put (Hunter) down?

Ms. Elden: No, no, and I was very, there was probably a few days before that observation that I tried to do that same thing with (Hunter). And, there probably was a few days after that, too. I'm just, in my mind I was like mind boggled how (Hunter) could start off with a pattern, first time, but then it goes . . . it's gone, right?

Ms. Kent: Yeah,

Ms. Elden: Where, so I'm very aware of that. But, I'm not going to umm . . .

Ms. Kent: You're not going to correct it because (Hunter) is wrong.

Ms. Elden: Not at all, right?

Ms. Kent: (Hunter) is not at this stage in (their) learning where (they're) able to grasp it.

Ms. Elden: Yeah.

Ms. Kent: You could, like, you already tried. You tried to show (Hunter) and (Hunter) was like, "huh?" (laughs). So, you're just reading the student and knowing what they're ready for.

Ms. Elden: Yeah. In my mind, I'm like . . .

Ms. Kent: And, you sent (Hunter) off happy like, right?

(Both laugh)

Researcher: Yeah. (Hunter) was, (they were) very proud of (themself) (laughs).

Ms. Elden: So yeah, so as long as (Hunter) is happy and coming to school, then maybe next year we'll tackle that pattern again. (laughs).

Ms. Kent: That's, That's funny.

Researcher: So, no rush for academic or cognitive advancement.

Ms. Kent: No. Not with JK's, no.

Ms. Elden: No. Not with, not in our classroom. And, I think it's safe to say not with us in particular, right?

Ms. Elden: Like, if there's a student who is going to be going into grade one next year, and we're like, “Okay, this kid does not have this skill,” then we'll pull them daily and help them but, it's not often that by the end of SK that there's kids that are so behind that, you know, that we're worried. And, at the same time, like, it is what it is. We're not going to have every student be like, even with one on one, it doesn't always matter. Like, it depends on what they're doing at home, like it needs to be really reiterated, you know? Home and school, and if it's only at school than it might take longer.

Ms. Elden: If I kept going at it, Hunter would never, (Hunter) would hate patterns for the rest of (their) life.

Ms. Kent: Yeah, that's not what’s in (Hunter’s) best interest.

Researcher: Hypothetically, if you did keep at it, what other messages might (they) receive from you?

Ms. Elden: “I can't do this.” “I am not good.”

Researcher: So, my note is, “the above activity offers an opportunity to consider what is primarily an academic exercise from a position of connection and relationship building. Regardless of Hunter’s output, Ms. Elden offers messages of acceptance, interest, trust, and joy.” Thoughts?

Ms. Kent: I think that's bang on. That's our main goal, belonging and contributing.

Researcher: Belonging and contributing?

Ms. Kent: Yeah, that's one of the four frames of the kindergarten curriculum. Problem solving and innovation, belonging and contributing, self regulation and well being, and math and literacy. So, one of those is academics. The rest are not.

The above excerpt ends with Ms. Kent reciting the four frames of the Ontario Kindergarten Curriculum while also calling attention to only one of frames being academic. According to the Ontario Kindergarten Program (2016), the four frames were designed to be aligned with the various and naturally occurring ways children learn. Interestingly however, Ms. Elden acknowledges that her intention was only to engage in an academic exercise, not thinking of what incidental relationship building or other learning may occur.

Researcher: So, in that particular situation, I'm curious, if you did this intentionally, or not. In that situation, it looked like "I'm not going to get Hunter to the spot that I want (them) to be in terms of the task at hand," right? "But, there's still opportunity here for me to build those other three pillars. Those are the three pieces of the kindergarten curriculum." So, connection, being able to build that relationship, that rapport with him, did you think about that cognitively or no?

Ms. Elden: (Shakes head in disagreement). That is our philosophy. We come in, for years that's always been our main focus and goal. And so, even though I wasn't necessarily thinking of it at that moment, that's just, that's just always there. We wouldn't think otherwise. That would always be our . . .

Researcher: So, not in the moment, but do you ever reflect on moments that you did that?

Ms. Kent: No (laughs). It's just so embedded in our daily, I mean, there's times where like, I'll handle a situation and be like, I could have done that differently, but . . .

Reducing the example above to basic concepts, Hunter is receiving minimal academic teaching. Ms. Elden offers little direction, no instruction, and no correction in errors. In this sense, although organized as an academic activity, the exercise is one that is fully relationship building. All three other themes above were observed. Ms. Elden was close to Hunter (Theme 1: Proximity), fist bumps them (Theme 2: Touch), and is paying attention to, and accepts, their process and final products in the activity (Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept). To Hunter, then, Ms. Elden's presentation may well have been just as, or perhaps even more, influential to their relationship with the ECE as it was to his academic advancement.

Presentation of educators is received and interpreted by the children they are in direct contact with (Woods, et al., 2017). However, children also observe their teachers' presentation with others, which in turn influences their own relationships with them (Endedijk et al., 2022). The education team and I explored the concept of what kindergarten students are learning from them when they are not directly involved in an event. We began this exercise by my review of the following observation.

> Observation 4 – 10:06 am: As most of the children have now made their way to the carpet, Kayce grabs a hold of another child by wrapping (their) arm around their neck and pulls them to the ground. Ms. Kent quickly jumps up off the rocking chair, says "no thank you" and physically removes Kayce's arm from the other child's neck. Kayce leaps to (their) feet and the teacher gently directs (them) away from the other child by placing her hand on the middle of Kayce's back.

I shared the observation with Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden during the final semi-structured interview and noted that my handwritten note that accompanied the observation reflected on connecting the kindergarten students' feelings of safety being tied to, in part, non-direct messages offered to

them. That is, beyond the direct messages Ms. Kent offered to Kayce and the other child (continuing with the example above), she also delivers messages of safety to the witnesses of the event because they watch Ms. Kent's response to the situation. This, in turn, can offer incidental teachings to the children of "when I am at risk of harm, I can trust the teacher will keep me safe." I asked the education team to share their thoughts on the idea of indirect messaging to the kindergarten students.

> Ms. Elden: My first thought is that the messaging, is that, these kids know that an adult will help them when needed. We've got their back.

The conversation between with the educators progressed as they explored direct messages of repair to both Kayce and the other kindergarten student. As we continued however, Ms. Kent revisited the idea that the messages that are being offered directly to some children are also indirect messages for all children.

> Ms. Kent: A lot of them like, let (Kayce) do it. And we're constantly like, "don't let Kayce jump on you, don't let Kayce sit on you because (they) think it's okay then."
>
> Researcher: Which puts other kids . . .
>
> Ms. Kent: Right, and not all of the kids like it, right? So, you might let (Kayce) but Joe over here does not like it and so we just saying no to everybody.

During this part of the interview, Ms. Kent offers an understanding that providing a message to one kindergarten student (i.e. "you can let Kayce jump on you") offers a non-verbal message for all kindergarten students (i.e. "Kayce can jump on everyone") which can have implications for some children's sense of safety while in the classroom (i.e. the children who do not enjoy or are fearful Kayce will jump on them).

We continued our conversation by bringing it back to the specific observation noted above. After I noted that it was “impossible” for other children not to see Kayce’s actions towards the other kindergarten student and Ms. Kent’s subsequent steps to come to the aid of the other child, I asked for additional thoughts on the event.

> Researcher: What do you think the kids would get out of that whole situation?
>
> Ms. Kent: Well, for one, we actually have kids that like, we have a couple of kids that won't even sit near Kayce, or (non-participating kindergarten student), or whoever. We have a couple of hands-on kids in here and they won't even sit near them because they don't even want to risk, even though they know we'll help them, they don't want to risk even having to go through that at all. But, I feel like for the rest of them it’s “Oh, it's okay, if Kayce wraps (their) arm around me, I will, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden will help us. Yeah.

Throughout the interview, there was never mention of the message “I will help you if Kayce becomes hands-on” as being offered by the teacher or ECE explicitly. Yet, according to Ms. Kent, there is an understanding across the kindergarten students in the classroom that they are safe. As Ms. Kent notes, some children take added precautions to maintain their safety (e.g. sitting away from Kayce and other hands-on kindergarten students). However, these children too “know we’ll help them” if another child becomes aggressive.

Conclusion

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of the results of this Creative Appreciative Inquiry study, the purpose of which was to hear from kindergarten students and educators regarding how emotional bonds are created within the formal school setting. Through connecting with the education team (i.e. teacher and Early Childhood Educator, ECE) and 12 kindergarten

students in a Northern Ontario kindergarten classroom, as well as some of the children's primary caregivers, this study intended to bring the kindergarten students' voices to the fore of teacher/child attachment discourse by considering the questions of: 1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? And, (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while away from their caregivers? Qualitative methods employed during the data collection process included semi-structured interviews with the education team, guided art exercises with the kindergarten students, and semi-structured interviews with selected caregivers. A list of all interview questions that guided the interview portions of data collection can be found in Appendix D below. Data was collected within two cycles of the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry and was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis. Data analysis was supported through the use of the NVivo software program.

The results of the study generated four themes: Proximity, Touch, Attend/Attune/Accept, and Presentation. These themes were witnessed across the multiple methods of data collection as isolated phenomena.

> Observation 2 – 1:03 pm: Ms. Elden crouches down beside student Kal to hear their story but does not actively engage with the students. (Theme 1: Proximity)
>
> Educator semi-structured interview: But the little things throughout the day. Like offering a squeeze on the shoulder as you walk by, a smile, a rub on the back. (Theme 2: Touch)

> Ginny (Greer's caregiver) interview: Greer knows there is somebody watching. Whether or not it's the direct visual or, you know, "we know (Greer is) over there." (Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept)
>
> Handwritten note from Observation: I reflected that the children all seemed a little more heightened during this observation than last time but that the presentations of Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden seem to continue to be calm and controlled. (Theme 4: Presentation)

Themes were also observed to be interrelated with the other themes created.

> Observation: Ms. Elden sits down beside Olsen on the bench. Olsen has not engaged when the teacher asks for children to contribute to making the schedule. Olsen looks up at the ECE and the 2 make eye contact. Ms. Elden offers Olsen a gentle shoulder bump while smiling before turning her head towards the sea of kindergarten students sitting on the carpet and quietly begins to echo the class shouting the classroom promise. Olsen continues to look at Ms. Elden, watching her slightly sway back and forth to the words with a slight smile on her face. Without breaking (their) gaze on Ms. Elden, Olsen joins in the promise recital.

In Chapter 5: Discussion, these themes will be considered regarding their connections to the research questions. Limitations to this study will also be explored. Stemming from the review of connections and limitations, recommendations will be offered for both applications to practice and future research directions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Raising kindergarten students' and their educators' voices to be central in educator-child attachment discourse was the main purpose of this research. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that coupled the action research methodology of Appreciative Inquiry with arts-based methods, this study presents participants' experiences and understandings in building relationships within the classroom through a detailed offering of observations, interviews, and art exercises that involved one education team (i.e. teacher and Early Childhood Educator, ECE), 12 kindergarten students and a selection of the children's primary caregivers). The intent was to explore two research questions: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? And, (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in the kindergarten students while away from their caregivers? Chapter 5: Discussion will build on the findings offered in the previous chapter to directly link the generated themes to the research questions; answering the question of how this study contributes to the current body of literature. As part of the discussion, limitations of this research will be identified, while coupling those limitations with the findings to offer recommendations to future practice and research. These recommendations will conclude the chapter.

Methods and Results

Following the 4D model of Appreciative Inquiry (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Deliver), data collection methods consisted of semi-structured interviews with educators and primary caregivers, classroom observations, and guided arts-based exercises with the kindergarten students. Beginning with the Discovery stage for the purposes of (1) highlighting skills of the education team in building emotional bonds with the kindergarten student participants, and (2)

promoting opportunity for the students to have their voices heard in identifying needs to building emotional connections with their teacher and ECE (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). Data collection for the Discovery stage included an initial semi-structured interview with the education team, three classroom observations, and one guided art exercise with the kindergarten students. The art exercise with the children bridged data collection into the Dream stage, where kindergarten students were offered a chance to explore future possibilities for how they see feelings of safety and care being met both currently and, in the future (Meier and Geldenhuys, 2017; Wiseman et al., 2018). After hearing from the child participants, the education team engaged in a second semi-structured interview. Bringing the data collection into the Design stage of the 4D process, the educators and I analysed the data collected to that point and coded it into categories and potential themes. Caregivers of kindergarten students whose artwork fell into the categories identified were also identified for future semi-structured interviews. During those interviews, caregivers shared their impressions and interpretations of their child's art. The caregiver interviews aided in developing further understanding of the children's art and their needs in building relationships with the educators that would then be applied to informing the Delivery stage (Latham & Ewing, 2018; Preston, 2017). The Delivery stage occurred with the education team implementing change in actions and behaviours that resulted from what was discovered in the other stages (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019).

To build on the data collected to the point of the Delivery stage, the study engaged in a second cycle of 4D. Continued data collection when engaging in Appreciative Inquiry research can be beneficial to reaching data saturation (Hall et al., 2021). Three more classroom observations continued the data collection and began the new cycle of 4D; discovering new and different actions that aid in kindergarten students' ability to form attachments with their

educators. The added observations also provided opportunities for the education team to display new and additional strategies they employ to emotionally connect with the children. The second 4D cycle continued to follow the data collection methods utilized in the first. Once the observations were completed, children were once again involved in a guided art exercise (Discovery) and draw-and-tell activity (Dream). Semi-structured interviews with the education team and selected caregivers (Design) followed, with the final Delivery portion of the 4D cycle to be concluded with the dissemination practices of this study, to be explored further in Chapter 6: Conclusion.

As part of the family of Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Watkins et al., 2020), Appreciative Inquiry follows the PAR model of research being relational by keeping participants active in the research process, at times even being identified as co-researchers (Bradbury et al., 2019). The education team were active and strong collaborators in this research, including aiding in the coding process following each art exercise which allowed for both insider (the education team) and outsider (me) collaboration in reviewing the data (Reed, 2006). Insight offered by the educators proved to be invaluable as we explored the wide-ranging data captured in the observations, group definition activities, and draw-and tell exercises. Data analysis also included member checking (via the "tell" portion of the draw-and-tell exercise where kindergarten students verbally explored and explained their artwork that depicted their understanding of the "safety" and "care" while at school) and triangulation with caregivers who where selected based on the categories that were emerging through the observations and children's artwork, adding to both additional interpretations of the art (Martin, 2019), and research as a whole (Latham & Ewing, 2018).

A reflexive thematic analysis was utilized throughout the study (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To execute this, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step thematic analysis, as presented by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), was continuously referenced and applied. Although, as the authors implore, following the 6-step model in a linear fashion was avoided as to make way for a more fluid thematic development (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, initial codes (step 2) identified through observations that contributed to the development of preliminary themes (step 3) reviewed by the education team (step 4) were then reassessed (step 2) utilizing new data collected from the second cycle of the 4D process. As part of the "reflexive" element of the analysis, the themes were generated with the understanding that they are built from the philosophical and procedural elements of how this research was conceived. Therefore, the themes are a product of me as the researcher and my conversations with the education team. Thematic analysis was concluded through the use of the NVivo software program.

The four themes that were constructed as a result of the data analysis are Physical Proximity, Touch, Attend/Attune/Accept, and Presentation. An initial theme of "closeness" was separated into two, Proximity and Touch, as there were multiple examples of the education team reducing space between them and kindergarten students with no physical contact made that was understood to influence feelings and emotional bonds. In addition to this, many examples of physical closeness without touch were instigated by the kindergarten students, not the educators. Child-led proximity seeking may indicate a need to feel close to an educator in order to feel safe and/or cared for while the teacher and ECE may be feeling that need during times that they are the instigators of coming in close to children (Kammrath & Clifton, 2018). Interestingly, there was no literature discovered that considered caregiver-led proximity seeking to aid in relationship development. However, through the findings of this research, educators initiating

being physically close to the kindergarten students could also help in building attachment bonds and was frequently observed in the data as an action used by the team to meet the learners' needs to feel safe while at school.

The examples of proximity-seeking were many, however many times that closeness was accompanied by physical touch. Through conversations with the education team, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden are clear that they utilize touch, including hugs, arm squeezes, holding hands, and fist bumps as a means to connect with the kindergarten students. Whereas Proximity and Touch both have the educator and child physically close to one another, the other two themes of Attend/Attune/Accept and Presentation were not as reliant on the location of Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden to continue to build positive emotional relationships with the children. Throughout the study, the education team both displayed (through observations) and discussed (through the semi-structured interviews) the importance of being attentive to the kindergarten students and how paying attention to the children, built opportunities to attune to their needs demonstrate messages of acceptance to them. In what seems to be the least represented in the literature, there was also a prominent theme of kindergarten students watching their educators and witnessing messages being delivered. These messages can relate to how Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden were acting and reacting in direct interactions with children. For example, how Ms. Kent presents while working with a child on an academic activity can influence the kindergarten student's feelings of safety. In addition, educator presentation proved to also be connected to building messages of safety and care even when they are not directly interacting with the children. That is, for instance, Ms. Elden may be delivering messages of safety and care to kindergarten students who are simply watching her engage with others.

Interpretations

Theme 1: Physical Proximity

Throughout attachment literature, the term proximity is not clearly defined. Indeed, even in Attachment theory founder John Bowlby's work, proximity is presented as a loosely defined concept that sees a person (typically referencing a child) "attaining" proximity to have physical and emotional needs met (Bowlby, 1988, p. 668). This broad conceptualization of proximity has led to contemporary researchers inconsistently narrowing the definition; at times connecting attachment and proximity to geographical location (Starrett, et al., 2021), environmental elements (Bademci et al., 2020), and psychological (Kammrath & Clifton, 2018) or emotional (Huang et al., 2022) closeness. Exploring the merits of these various definitions is beyond the scope of this study and will not be presented here. However, as this research was concerned with raising the voices of educators and kindergarten students to the top of educator-child attachment discourse, it is important to highlight that the data did not present significant reference to geographical or environmental attachment. In addition, as the themes are defined in Chapter 4: Results, Kammrath and Clifton's concept of psychological proximity and Huang et al.'s, position on emotional closeness are better placed in Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept and are explored further below. For this research endeavour, kindergarten student and educator physical closeness was most evident, and so most logically defined, through the closing of physical proximity and touch.

Early on in the study, the education team reflected on the classroom assent exercise in which I engaged the kindergarten students and noted that some children were likely not to be as attentive to my presentation if Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden positioned themselves away from them. The educators were strategic in situating themselves close to children that otherwise might have

struggled to maintain focus on my description of the research. Additional examples of educators closing proximity to be close to children were offered in Chapter 4: Results highlight both times when they were mindful of maintaining physical closeness to the kindergarten students (e.g., Ms. Elden deescalating a student conflict while kneeling and staying near the child displaying the most agitation) and other times that they perhaps were less mindful (e.g., a child appearing close to the teacher merely to "check in"). The educators being physically close to the kindergarten students, or allowing children to come along side them, aligns with Magro et al.'s (2023) position of being physically close to students increases feelings of emotional closeness. As there were many indicators in this research that the educators sought out opportunities to reduce physical space with the kindergarten students, these examples suggest that the education team addresses Question 2 of this research project through ensuring there is physical closeness between them and the children. That is, the education team create and sustain feelings of safety and care in the kindergarten students by being close to them, physically.

The example of the kindergarten student appearing to check in with Ms. Kent is also informative, as it is possibly demonstrating a time where the teacher is not only creating an environment to increase feelings of safety (by simply being available for a close proximal interaction), but it may also be offering indication of what kindergarten students need in the classroom to feel safe and cared for (addressing the research question of what children need to create emotional bonds with the education team). In Ms. Kent's retelling of the time when Sunny came close to her, it was clear that the teacher was unsure of why Sunny was "just standing really close" to her, indicating to the teacher that they did not need anything. It is possible that, as Sunny noted they needed nothing more from Ms. Kent other than to simply be close to her, that the physical closeness is the need that is being met. This is in keeping with the literature as it

indicates kindergarten students seeking physical proximity with caregivers to feel safe and secure (Bei, 2022; Kammrath & Clifton, 2018).

Proximity-seeking is commonly identified in the literature as fulfilling a need for children to feel safe and cared for. Interestingly, there is a gap in the literature regarding how the proximity is sought, and by whom. Empirical studies identify children as being the initiators of closing proximity between themselves and their caregivers, including educators (Bei et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022). Indeed, there were many examples of this in the data collected for this study, including the example of Sunny noted above. Another example offered in the results was Greer's art, highlighted in Chapter 4: Results. The art demonstrates Greer connecting with Ms. Elden to help regulate Greer's emotions by being close to her. Greer's caregiver indicated that Greer would instigate this connection as "(Greer) can go to Ms. Elden who has lots of love to give . . . (Greer) is looking for the calm in the storm. And for (them), that's one of Greer's teachers." With the above noted, the literature has a dearth of offerings pertaining to caregiver or educator-initiated proximity-seeking.

The literature acknowledges that children will seek to be close to caregivers to increase feelings of safety (Huang et al., 2022). Although it is clear in the literature that caregiver factors play a large role in who the child seeks physical closeness with, there is no recognition of times when caregivers seek to be near children to meet the children's needs of proximity and deliver messages of safety and care. For instance, Bademci et al. (2020) identify the need for the caregiver to be receptive to the child's proximity-seeking behaviours yet stops short in recognizing the importance of caregivers demonstrating proactive actions to shrink physical distance between them and the children for whom they care. Although Magro et al., (2023) highlight that teachers can display awareness of children's needs, the authors do not indicate that

the educators will seek out the children to meet those needs, instead indicating that it is the children that will seek the teachers out because they demonstrate awareness of need. Kammrath and Clifton (2018) too, only call attention to the caregivers' responses to proximity-seeking and do not mention caregivers recognizing and acting on times children are proximity-needing. Another example in the literature is MacAlpine (2017), who calls attention to relationship building between caregiver and child to be reciprocal in nature, with the adult/child connection being continual and in need of consistent and positive give-and-take by both parties. This is in keeping with Rea et al.'s (2016) concept of increasing time (particularly regarding being physically close to one another) between child and caregiver aiding in feelings of safety and security with the child. Yet, neither MacAlpine nor Rea et al. go so far as to note how these times of closeness commence, and by whom. The data collected during this study suggests that educators are conscious of kindergarten students' need to be physically close to them and highlight times when the education team were proactive in meeting that need. As indicated by the educators sitting next to children who may need to be close to their school caregivers to help them get through a class event (such as when I delivered the assent presentation) or to help them navigate through interpersonal struggles and heightened emotions (such as illustrated through the example with Taeo), Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden seemed to demonstrate a knowledge of when kindergarten students have a need to be close to them and address that need by initiating physical closeness.

Theme 2: Touch

As compared to Theme 1: Physical Proximity, the literature offers less ambiguity regarding the influence of physical touch on educator-kindergarten student relationships. Physical contact between educators and students often acts as a primary means of communication for them

(Hedlin & Åberg, 2020). The messaging that is conveyed can be both instructive (e.g., guiding a child in the required direction with a hand placed on the back or hand-over-hand task completion) or relational (a hug for comfort or holding hands while walking), both of which were displayed throughout this research. Regarding relational messages, unlike the topic of close physical proximity and educator-child attachment bonds, the literature is clear that teachers can be aware of student needs to be in physical contact with them and will take action to respond to those needs (Bosmans et al., 2023). This contact may be offered in the form of the teacher holding hands with their student (Murray et al., 2023), hugging or embracing (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020), a pat on the back (Hedlin & Åberg, 2020), and high-fives (Cheng, et al., 2021).

As the data accumulated in this study, Bosmans et al.'s (2023) position that educators will respond to student needs of physical comfort became evident through the many different examples offered by Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden utilizing touch. The previous chapter offered examples of the education team both offering and receiving hugs, having their hair played with by kindergarten students during lessons, inviting or allowing children to sit on their laps, and offering back rubs or head tickles as they pass by the learners on their way to another task. Particular mention was made to an interaction between Ms. Kent and Olsen, where Olsen frequently reached out for Ms. Kent's hand during a dance activity. The teacher responded positively each time, accepting the hand holding, making quick eye contact with a smile before looking back to the other kindergarten students. Olsen would break contact momentarily, only to reach back out to grab Ms. Kent's hand again. Each time, Ms. Kent seemed happy to hold Olsen's hand for as little or long as Olsen needed. As Magro et al. (2023) connects children and teacher engaging in touch as being a factor in building relationships, Murray et al. (2023) calls

attention to hand holding being an indicator of child-educator emotional connection. Therefore, Olsen and the teacher holding hands during the dance exercise could be an example of the bond that has already formed between the two. Important to the research question regarding how educators deliver messages of safety and care to kindergarten students, Ms. Kent's unwavering acceptance of Olsen's hand implies that she recognizes Olsen's needs in that moment and will respond to meet those needs.

In addressing the other research question of this study, some kindergarten students were able to find their voice in expressing their need for physical touch through the art exercises of this study. In Chapter 4, participant Hunter's art was offered as an example of connecting the term "care" to Hunter seeking hugs from the educators. Perhaps an indicator linking touch to children's needs from educators to feel safe in and of itself, Hunter's expression through their art also prompted the education team to reflect on Hunter's needs, noting that they "talk about hugs a lot," suggesting that the physical act of hugs is a need of Hunter's to feel safe and cared for at school.

Theme 3: Attention/Attune/Accept

Themes 1 and 2 share the element of physical closeness between educators and kindergarten students. These acts of closing proximity or engaging in touch were in many instances thoughtful and intended to address a need presented to have children feel safe and cared for. However, other times it was evident that the education team engaged in physical connection with the kindergarten students with a lack of awareness of need (such as the proximity example with Sunny in Theme 1) or utilizing physical contact as proactive measures, not necessarily attuning to the kindergarten students' presenting needs. In combination with the absences of awareness when applying physical connection to the kindergarten students, the

education team demonstrated emotional connections with the children that were primarily tied to factors that fell outside the physical realm. To capture these instances, a new theme was generated for moments and examples in the data that illustrated educator-child relationships being formed/strengthened through verbal language, demonstrating patience, exhibiting interest, and presenting as excited.

The three components of Theme 3 include attention being paid to the kindergarten students by the educators, the Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden attuning to the children's needs and interests, and accepting the kindergarten students' individuality and presentation. As was highlighted in Chapter 4, each element of this theme built off the previous. That is, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden would attend to the kindergarten students (i.e. engaging in verbal communication) which would lead to them seeking attuning to the children (i.e. asking questions, being curious), before offering messages of acceptance (i.e. verbal praise, demonstrating excitement). Beginning with attention, the data highlights examples of the educators engaging in conversation with kindergarten students, asking questions, and otherwise portraying a level of engagement with the children. These examples are in keeping with Regueiro et al.'s (2022) position that caregivers who are attentive to the children in their care provide an open opportunity for themselves to respond to the children according to the needs being presented. As such, the educators providing attention to the kindergarten students in the class suggest an effort to move toward addressing the needs of the children in their classroom, connecting to the research question of how teachers address child needs while away from caregivers.

Offering attention is an essential lead into a caregiver beginning to understand and attune to the needs of children (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). During the first semi-structured interview with the educators, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden alluded to an understanding of the requirement to

first attend to the kindergarten students before being able to attune to their needs (and offer messages of acceptance, explored later in this chapter), noting that seeing the children and recognizing their presence builds towards them offering understanding the needs that are presenting (attuning) and offering praise (acceptance). Exactly how attuning to the children occurs can vary, however it is clear in the literature that, for caregivers to move beyond paying attention to them and to attune to the children in their care, there must be a reciprocal and responsive display of listening to the children followed by appropriate action (Weinstein et al., 2023). The action of attuning can include simple follow up questions or display of curiosity as well as more intricate actions that demonstrate a caregiver's ability to understand and respond to multiple and simultaneous needs such as the need to feel cared for, safe, and liked. An example of this ability to demonstrate attuning to multiple needs can be seen in the example offered in the previous chapter through an observation excerpt that depicted the ECE, Ms. Elden, interacting with kindergarten students in the bear's den. From the observation, it can be noted that Ms. Elden attends the bear's den and offers multiple messages of understanding and curiosity; asking how many bears were in the den and what those bears did to prepare the den. She also offered messages of safety in ensuring there were not too many bears in the den at once. Children look for educators to be attuned to their need for relational connection via imaginative play (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). Therefore, it is likely that Ms. Elden was able to meet that need in the bear's den example and offered additional knowledge in both (a) what children look for in educators to feel safe and cared for and (b) how educators address those needs.

Being attuned to the kindergarten students, that is, recognizing that attention builds towards an understanding of needs and interests that portrays responsiveness to the children, is essential for the kindergarten students to see the educators as appropriate attachment figures

(Alamos & Williford, 2019; Kearns & Hart, 2017). The third component of this theme, acceptance, builds on the previous concepts of attention paid to kindergarten students and attuning to their interests through a demonstration to them that those interests are understood, accepted, and appreciated by their caregivers. Engaging in activities, such as play or other exercises that children express interest in, aids in building positive relationships between students and educators (Alamos & Williford, 2019). Chapter 4 also offers an example pulled from the data that was initiated by artwork created by Asher. Asher painted a picture of them closing a door with the educators watching them. Through the semi-structured interview conducted with Asher's caregiver, it was noted that it was important for Asher to be seen as helpful by Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden. The caregiver noted that when the educators watch Asher (paying attention) and offer messages that support in their actions (attuning to Asher's needs), Asher feels pride and accepted by the education team. Being responsive to children's interests (Weinstein et al., 2023), offering messages of acceptance (Zheng et al., 2023), can aid in children feeling a sense of security with caregivers and in building positive relationships between them and their educators (Bosmans et al., 2023). Asher showing themselves closing the door while the educators watch can be seen as an example of Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden's attention to, attuning, and accepting of Asher, connecting to both what Asher's needs are while also acknowledging what educators do to have children feel safe and cared for at school (the research questions of this study).

Theme 4: Presentation

Both seminal (Bowlby, 1969) and contemporary (Scherzinger-Wettstein, 2018; Ştefan & Avram, 2021) attachment research place a strong emphasis on the direct interactions between caregiver and child in relationship formation. As can be understood through the first three

themes identified in this research, emotional bonds between educators and kindergarten students are likely influenced by the direct actions of physical closeness (proximity), physical contact (touch), and relational acceptance (attend/attune/accept). The fourth theme generated in this study both adds to the understanding of direct exchanges influencing educator-child relationships, however also calls attention to the influence indirect messaging has on building and maintaining positive relationships in the classroom. Although there is ample research that has explored how educators' presentation toward students directly influences their relationships with those children, there is limited literature exploring two key areas of this relationship building that was prominent in the data analysis of this study: (a) educators strengthen relationships with children, even when relationship building is not the primary intent of the interaction and (b) indirect influences, such as when kindergarten students are acting as observers to exchanges between their peers and the educators, also factors into relationship building. Together, the concepts of how educators present while engaging in non-relational based activities (i.e. learning exercises) and their presenting actions when being observed with other children combine to create the last theme of this study.

Woods et al. (2017) note that young children's ability to form emotional bonds with others is influenced by what they see in their caregivers. Therefore, it is important for educators to have awareness of how they are presenting to the children while in their presence. At times, as was evident in the data, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden were conscious in their presentation towards the kindergarten students. In Chapter 4, there were examples from the data that illustrated how both Ms. Elden (in her working through a peer disagreement between Kal and Taeo) and Ms. Kent (through her being available to Olsen during a dance exercise) were mindful in how they were presenting to the kindergarten students. Interestingly, both the examples above were direct

exchanges between the educators and children and were not academic in nature. When Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden are working with the kindergarten students on learning activities, the educators' awareness of their presentation was reduced, as was exemplified in the observation and subsequent educator semi-structured interview that reviewed Ms. Elden's work with Hunter and pattern making with coloured stones. Although Hunter made a mistake in creating the pattern, Ms. Elden focused on praise and accepting messages and not correcting the error. Upon reflecting on the experience, Ms. Elden noted that she "wasn't necessarily thinking of" messages to strengthen her emotional bond with Hunter. When asked to reflect on other, similar experiences that involved learning output and if they were conscious of building connection with the kindergarten students, Ms. Kent noted that she does not think of strengthening relationships in those moments because "it is so embedded in our daily." Kearns and Hart (2017) discuss the concept of teaching a "hidden curriculum" (p. 520) that focuses on caring for children and building attachment with them while they are students in the educators' classroom. The data collected for this research confirms that caregivers being aware of their presentation when interacting with the children aids in them looking to meet the needs of the children in bonding with them. However, it seems these moments of thoughtful relationship building may not be as present when the educators are attempting to engage the kindergarten students in academic tasks. Considering the research question of educators meeting the needs of kindergarten students in regard to feeling safe and cared for, it is interesting to note that, conscious or not, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden will abandon the pursuit of academic output from the kindergarten students to ensure they feel "belonging" while with their educators at school.

Another area that the presentation of the Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden seemed to indirectly influence relationship building was in their interactions with kindergarten students while others

observed those interactions. Although it is noted in the literature that students observe their teachers' presentation with other students, which in turn influences their future relationships, current research falls short in identifying specifically the impact that these observations may have on educator-child relationships (Endedijk et al., 2022). The gap in the literature misses an opportunity to highlight how direct messages of safety and care to one or two children may offer similar messages to many other children who observed particular exchanges between their peers and the educators. In Chapter 4, the example of Kayce grabbing another child and pulling them to the ground was offered. The event was observed with many other kindergarten students bearing witness to it. When reviewing the observation with the education team, Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden reflected on the complexities of it and similar circumstances where Kayce or other children become physical with their peers. In a class full of kindergarten students, some are fearful of the more aggressive children, others indifferent, while others still display enjoyment when children like Kayce become hands-on with them. The educators noted that they maintain firm boundaries when it comes to these types of behaviours, regardless of which children are involved. Their intent of keeping the no hands-on boundary is to provide the message to kindergarten students that they will all be kept safe from physical harm. The educators were cognizant of the message that might be given to children that are afraid of being harmed if they permitted such behaviours to occur. This awareness infers that the education team utilize their presentation in the classroom as a means of offering messages of safety to the kindergarten students, even when they are not directly communicating with them.

Limitations

First noted in Chapter 4, the results of this study culminated in identifying four themes that were evident throughout the data collection process and that connected to the topic of child-

educator attachment. In Chapter 5, the themes were once again presented, this time for the purpose of aligning them with the two research questions this study looked to explore. Considering the questions of child needs for building attachment bonds and how teachers meet those needs, close proximity, physical touch, being attentive and accepting, and presenting as caring and safe are identified as factors that children look for to feel emotionally connected to their education team. In turn, educators offer all four of these factors to meet the kindergarten students needs. However, although this research endeavour contributes to what is known about the topic of educator-child attachment, there are some limitations to the study.

This research was conducted in a single kindergarten classroom in Northern Ontario. The setting of the study provided opportunity to examine the attachment bonds forming with children who are beginning to spend less time in the home and are experiencing the formal education sector for the first time (Bérubé et al., 2018; Hertz et al., 2019). Still, the benefit of exploring this formative time in the kindergarten students' lives is balanced with the limitation of an inability to generalize the study. This research is unique to the environment and culture within which it was located. Although researchers call for increased empirical endeavours in Northern areas (Bonnycastle & Simpkins, 2019), the study is now tied to this classroom and area, providing rich stories of attachment building but cannot presume to be generalizable to other peoples' experiences in educator-child relationships.

Of particular note regarding an inability to generalize the research, participant information collected for this study did not include areas such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Although there is literature highlighting the variances in educator-child attachment formations when such factors are accounted (see Partee et al., 2022), these elements of participant demographics were not considered during this study. Therefore, findings of this research cannot

speak to the influences of factors such as race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status when relationships are being built within the kindergarten experience.

The inability to generalize this research also connects to bring in myself into the study. In Chapter 1 above, I reflected on bringing myself into the research (Martinez-Brawley, 2020). The appreciation of researchers' histories and experiences influencing their research was deepened in Chapter 3, highlighting the involved presence of the researcher in the methodology chosen for this study as well as noting Salamon's (2017) offering of praxis, identifying that findings of the research too, are a reflection of me and how I see the world. As there is a high level of researcher presence in this study, a limitation can be that it presents one of many ways to consider concepts such as relationships, safety, care, and learning. Researchers or those who engage with this research that do not share a paradigm built on the theories of attachment and social constructivism may perhaps see relationship formation in kindergarten classrooms different than I have presented it here.

Lastly, the intent of this research was to bring, in part, kindergarten student voice to the fore in educator-child attachment discourse. Although the study was successful in highlighting children's experiences in building relationships with their education team, the research is still limited in the two areas when raising child voice to top of discussion. First, the research offers no longitudinal data. As is evident in studies such as Huang et al.'s (2022), seeing educator-child relationships across a long duration of time offers different understandings of the phenomenon and is not offered here. Also, this study was able to bring to bear the dearth of literature and knowledge on caregiver-led attachment-seeking. As noted above, most research continues to explore child-led actions to building and maintaining attachment. This research highlights that children lead in many of the activities that build relationships between them and their educators.

Yet, there are also many examples of educators initiating relationship building interactions, not just reacting to the perceived needs of the students. This study did not target specifically children's opinions or feelings on educator-led relationship building versus child-led relationship building.

Recommendations

Highlighting children's voices in this research to explore the topic of educator-child attachment offers many future opportunities. In terms of the application of the findings, hearing from the children on what they need to feel safe and cared for while at school can be influential in future considerations in advancing the provincial kindergarten curriculum. With regards to Theme 4: Presentation specifically, combining kindergarten students' voices with how educators look to address those needs should include a greater awareness on the part of the educators to expand their consideration of when relationship building occurs. These recommendations are elaborated below.

Future research directions, too, can be informed by the findings of this study. Beyond efforts to replicate the findings through congruent research, the results of this study compels future research to expand on opportunities to bring children's voices to the fore. Continuing and growing empirical exploration of children's expression of needs when building relationships with their educators can be done through both the adoption of different methodological direction (such as the incorporation of longitudinal data collection) as well as paying particular focus on educator-initiated attachment-seeking actions. Both longitudinal studies and educator-directed relationship building have little literature exploration. Lastly, research on the topic of educator-child attachment has rarely considered cultural differences. It is recommended that future studies

look to consider individualized needs for building relationships in the classroom that includes a cultural component.

Practice Applications

Ontario Curriculum: The Kindergarten Program (2016) and Subsequent Addendums (2018 and 2019).

Ontario's current kindergarten program was implemented in 2016. Since that time, the province has published two addendums (2018 & 2019). The government directives offered in these documents highlight the imperative need for children to be able to self-regulate their emotions, stating that it is "the cornerstone of development and a central building block of early learning" (Pascal, 2009, p. 4 as cited in The Kindergarten Program, 2016). The 2018 Addendum calls attention to kindergarten students' ability to self-regulate as part of the assessment measures and expectations of learning. Children learn to self-regulate through co-regulation strategies offered by their caregivers (Singh et al., 2021). Singh et al. note that these strategies include responding to children's needs and stressors by way of engaging in gentle physical contact (such as was identified in Theme 2: Touch), offering a soothing tone of voice (Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept), and demonstrating a calm presentation (Theme 4: Presentation). Surprisingly, there is no reference to a need for educators to engage in co-regulation exercises within Ontario's kindergarten program nor it's subsequent addendums. The literature notes that educators engaging in co-regulation exercises positively influence students' ability to learn in the classroom (Braund & Timmons, 2021). These same exercises also improve positive relationships between educators and students, which in turn also increase students' learning capabilities (Burgess, 2023). As the results of this study highlight the positive influence close proximity, touch, attention and acceptance, and presentation have on building relationships between

educators and kindergarten students, it is recommended that the province of Ontario consider revising the kindergarten program to better reflect the need for educators to engage in relationship building, co-regulation activities that will lead to children's increased abilities to self-regulate.

Educator Positioning when Entering into Learning Activities with Children.

Particularly addressing Theme 4: Presentation, a recommendation resulting from this study is for kindergarten educators in their teaching practice to consider all learning activities as both academic and relational. Prominent in the data analysis of this study was two key areas of this relationship building between educators and kindergarten students. First, even when relationship building is not the primary intent of the interaction, educators have the ability to strengthen relationships with the children. Additionally, kindergarten students who are not directly interacting with the education team, instead acting as observers to exchanges between their peers and the educators, are indirectly learning about their own relationships with the educators as a result. This study calls attention to educators being more aware of meeting the needs of their classroom children to feel safe and cared for when they are directly engaging them in non-academic activities. When presented with data to indicate kindergarten students were receiving messages of care (such as Ms. Elden's engagement with Hunter while working on pattern creation) and safety (such as Ms. Kent when intervening on student Kayce's physicality with other children) that were indirect in nature the education team expressed agreement and understanding. However, in moments such as those listed above, the educators were candid in their reflections to note they did not consider those moments as relationship builders. Recognizing that Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden not being conscious of all moments being relationship moments, it is recommended that kindergarten educators look to unveil the hidden curriculum of

relationship building in the formal education system (Kearns & Hart, 2017). Children interpret what they see and place those observations within their understanding of the emotional bonds they have with their caregivers (Wall et al., 2019). Educators planning for academic exercises and other interactions with relationship forming in mind will open up additional opportunities for them to build stronger bonds with the children in their classroom.

Sustainable Educational Practice.

This research offers an opportunity for teachers, ECEs, and other professionals who partner with educators (such as I did in my previous experience as a social worker, noted in Chapter 1 above) to consider elements that contribute to building environments of sustainable education practice. As noted in Chapter 3 above, the design of the methodology for this study was future focused through (a) the general study of the topic (Murray et al., 2016), the core principles of Simultaneity and Anticipatory within the Appreciative Inquiry methodology (Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017), and the Creative Inquiry Process element of Arts-Informed Research (Sankarasubramanyan & Joshi, 2019). With the new kindergarten program forthcoming in Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2024), and a nod to back to basics direction in reading and math, the need for the kindergarten program to better reflect the need for educators to engage in relationship building including co-regulation activities that will lead to children's increased abilities to self-regulate is ever more present. In doing so, and by continuing to highlight the positive relationship building actions educators are doing to promote feelings of safety and care with the children in their classrooms, environments are created to sustain education practice for the future.

Future Research

Increasing Transferability through Replication.

This research was not intended to offer any claims of generalizability in the results. On the contrary, both Appreciative Inquiry (Lane et al., 2018) and Arts Informed Research (Clough & Nutbrown, 2019) balks at attempts to generalize research findings and looks to find new truths that hold deep meaning for those participating in the research (Bailey & Van Harken, 2014; Bradbury et al., 2019). However, as Nowell et al. (2017) note, qualitative researchers are responsible for provide information-rich studies to allow future researchers who wish to explore the transferability of findings within their own contexts to do so. Replicating qualitative studies is noted to be difficult, however this should not detract from attempting to offer a study that submits a thorough presentation of methodology and findings (in the case of authoring researchers) or attempts to apply those methodological directions to apply the same research efforts in different environments (in the case of future researchers) (Roberts et al., 2019). It is my hope that future researchers look to replicate this study in efforts to continue to build our collective understanding of the educator-child attachment topic and, in doing so, find elements of the findings presented that are transferable across various environments.

Expanding Children's Voices Through Educator-Led Relationship Building and Longitudinal Research.

This research has been able to address the topic of educator-child relationship building through considering questions of what kindergarten students need to feel safe and cared for while at school and how do educators address those needs. It was demonstrated Chapter 4: Results that Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden participating in this study initiated multiple points of connection with the kindergarten students, particularly regarding being physically close in proximity to them and

offering reassuring and gentle touch. Yet, the literature seems to focus entirely on child proximity-seeking and educators responding to child-led physical need demonstration. I argue that, in not recognizing educator-initiated moments of connection the topic misses an opportunity to highlight child voice in the discourse of teacher/child relationship building. Future research that focuses on moments when educators are the commencers of physical contact or closeness will provide kindergarten students the opportunity to consider and express themselves regarding these actions.

Although the argument is made above for replicating the current study, there is also opportunity to expand on children's voice by moving away from the methods that have guided data collection for this research. Data collection for this research was completed over a 2-month span and involved educators, caregivers, and children as participants. Attachment research is well cited in the literature, yet most studies' findings do not offer an understanding of the topic through longitudinal data collection. Indeed, attachment research considering primary caregivers (Bailey et al., 2022; Psychogiou et al., 2018), educators as attachment figures (Burgess, 2023; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017), and children's perspectives on relationships with their teachers (Garner et al., 2020; White, 2016) all focus on moment-in-time research with little consideration for how attachments may evolve over a longer period of time. Although there is some literature that looks to offer a longitudinal approach to the topic of educator-student attachment (Huang et al., 2022; Stefan & Negrean, 2021), this area of research could benefit from additional research that follows the development and maintenance of attachment formations between children and their teachers across a longer duration. Additional longitudinal data can offer a different opportunity to have children's voices heard in the literature, considering their needs across a longer timeline of relationship with their educators (Garner et al., 2020).

Research Culturally Specific Attachment Practices pertaining to Education.

Attachment bonds between educators and children has been rigorously studies for over 50 years and across a myriad of countries, cultures, and environments (Thompson et al., 2022). However, as noted in Chapter 2: Literature Review, Attachment theory is not without its criticisms. One such critic pertains to the lack of cultural considerations when exploring the topic (Keller, 2018; Keller 2022). I disagree with Keller's works' position on a narrowly studied theory that does not account for non-western and middle socioeconomic class. After all, even a review of the literature used for building this chapter would build a greater understanding of how educator-child relationship bonds are formed when considering influences of socioeconomic status (Alamos & Williford, 2019; Bademci et al., 2020) and various cultural considerations (Bei et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020). However, it is important for future researchers to continue to consider cultural teachings and practices when advancing empirical knowledge on the subject. Considering Canadian context particularly, it will be important for new research to build on Indigenous ways of understanding attachment, and how those ways might be impacted by children entering into the formal education system. Choate et al. (2020) highlight the continued colonialization of Canadian Indigenous peoples through, in part, a lack of respect in the field of attachment to consider cultural-specific attachment practices. Future studies should build on the concept of cultural attachment and consider its influence on educator-child relationships.

Although in disagreement with Keller's (2022) position of empirical exploration of attachment and cultural considerations, I encourage researchers interested in this research topic to question and explore different ways of understanding concepts such as relationships, safety, care, and learning. This research is highly reflective of myself as a researcher (Martinez-

Brawley, 2020), including the theoretical underpinnings I bring into the study. Other researchers have considered child-educator relationships through a different lens (for a more post-structuralist lens, see Nichols & Coleman, 2020. For a critical theory lens, see Huston et al., 2019). Although replication of this study could lend to further understanding of the research topic from an attachment and social constructivist lens, it is also recommended that researchers not aligned with such a paradigm to continue to build what is known about such an important field.

As noted in Chapter 4 above, the inability to generalize this research connects to bringing myself into the study. In Chapter 1, I reflected on bringing myself into the research (Martinez-Brawley, 2020). I also acknowledged an appreciation for researchers' histories and experiences as influential to their research in Chapter 3, highlighting the involved presence of the researcher in the methodology chosen for this study as well as noting Salamon's (2017) offering of praxis, identifying that findings of this research are a reflection of me and how I see the world. There is a high level of researcher presence in this study. As such, a limitation of this research can be that it presents one of many ways to consider concepts such as relationships, safety, care, and learning. Those who engage with this research that do not share a paradigm built on the theories of attachment and social constructivism may perhaps see relationship formation in kindergarten classrooms different than what is presented here.

Conclusion

Building off the findings offered in Chapter 4: Results, this chapter connected the four themes presented (Physical Proximity, Touch, Attend/Attune/Accept, and Presentation) to the specific research questions this study set out to explore. There were many examples of educators shrinking space between themselves and the kindergarten students (Theme 1: Proximity) as well

as proximity seeking that is led by the children. Child-led proximity seeking could indicate needing to feel close to an educator to feel safe and cared for. Interpreting that need, the teacher and ECE may instigate coming in close proximity to kindergarten students to fulfil the need being presented (Kammrath & Clifton, 2018). In many instances, educators and kindergarten students coming in close with each other culminated in physical contact (Theme 2: Touch). The education team noted that they implement strategies of offering hugs, arm squeezes, holding hands, and fist bumps as a means to connect with children. This connects to the research question of what educators do to have the children feel safe and cared for while at school. Outside of being in physical contact or close to the kindergarten students, the education team both displayed and discussed the importance of being attentive to the children and how paying attention to the kindergarten students, built opportunities to attune to their needs demonstrate messages of acceptance to them (Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept). There was also evidence from the children's art and caregiver interviews that Theme 3 was important for kindergarten students to feel cared for while at school. Finally, there was also a prominent theme of children watching their educators and witnessing messages being delivered (Theme 4: Presentation). Although, this theme is the least represented in the literature). How the education team present while working with the kindergarten students (even when they are not interacting with them directly or are focused on academic activities) can influence the children's feelings of safety.

Limitations of this study include a small sample size and geographical location impacting its ability to be generalizable as well as continued concerns with offering the most opportunity to hear from the kindergarten students themselves. Considering both the findings and limitations, recommendations from this study include practice applications and implications to future research. Regarding practice, the Ontario Kindergarten Program should be revisited and revised

to better reflect needs of children to build relationships (such as co-regulation exercises) and for educators to be more mindful of how their presentation in academic activities and indirect interactions may influence relationship building with the children. Future research should attempt to replicate this study for transferability purposes. New studies on the topic of educator-child attachment should also look at expanding children's voices through longitudinal studies and further exploring educator-led attachment building. Lastly, research should continue to explore cultural-specific factors to building relationships between teachers and their kindergarten students. Chapter 6: Conclusion will offer a concluding summary of this dissertation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research focused on the topic of attachment formation between kindergarten students and their educators. In Chapter 1, I reflected on my time as a kindergarten student. Some moments from that time, such as the enjoyment I felt while I built the next, best, building blocks robot figurine, are still so vivid in my mind that it feels as though those memories were formed yesterday. Yet, there are many more moments, thoughts, and feelings that time has now robbed from me. I cannot remember, for instance, how I felt when I was with my teacher. Did she make me feel safe? When at school, was I given messages of being cared for? Would I have even known if those messages were offered so that they could live on in my memory? As I close this endeavour of my career, of my life, I feel privileged and honoured that I was given the opportunity to explore kindergarten students' experiences with their educators that promoted those feelings of safety and care while they were away from their primary caregivers. Experiences that, perhaps, the kindergarten students may not remember or be able to verbally articulate how the actions of their education team helped build their relationships with one another. More than this, incorporating ways in this research that captured the children's voices in this moment of time on how Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden built feelings of safety and care within them, not only adds to the current literature on the topic, but (just as importantly) I hope it enriched the lives of those who participated in the study. I know it enriched mine.

In this final chapter, the purpose and rationale for this study will be revisited to link the findings back to the discourse of educator-child attachment. The research questions will be posed once more, with a view to consider in what ways the results of this study contribute to answering them. Beyond the findings themselves, perhaps just as important to the contributions to current knowledge are the dissemination plans for that knowledge. Included in this chapter is a section

that will highlight sharing the information acquired while completing this study. Concluding this chapter, and this dissertation, will be a discussion on this research's implications on future research and practice prior to a sharing of final reflections.

Research Purpose

This research explored the lesser-cited attachment topic of educator-child relationships (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). The broader topic of attachment itself is immensely complex. Yet, moving away from the more commonly studied topic of primary caregiver-child attachment adds additional intricacies for consideration. Speidel et al. (2023) highlights that building emotional bonds between caregiver and child is a continuous act of combining past relationship experiences to define what those bonds look like. Therefore, when a secondary attachment figure, such as an educator, is introduced to a child's life, both the child and caregiver construct that relationship using evidence from past personal events, adding to the already established web of bonds previously formed (Pallini et al., 2018).

Alluded at the beginning of this chapter, of great importance to me as I explored the topic of secondary attachment between kindergarten students and their educators was to bring the child voice to the forefront of discussion. Hearing from young children on the topic of creating emotional bonds between them and their educators are rare, with children's voices more often than not being muted in the research process (Wastell & Degotardi, 2018). Keeping to the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Children (UNCRC), that implored researchers to include children as active participants in research that includes them (Jørgensen, 2019), I looked to creative means of data collection, framed within an Appreciative Inquiry methodology, to engage the child participants, offering them meaningful and more developmentally aligned ways to express themselves and so meaningfully contribute to the topic being studied (Wall et al., 2019).

A research endeavour that explores the topic of educator-child attachment utilizing an Appreciative Inquiry and arts-informed methods has yet to be demonstrated in the literature.

Particularly, this research, entitled *Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry* investigated the phenomenon of relationship building between kindergarten students and their education team by posing two key questions: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers?; and (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in the children while they are away from their caregivers?

Addressing the Purpose

Adding to the research topic

The purpose of this Creative Appreciative Inquiry was to hear from kindergarten students and educators on how emotional bonds are created and perpetuated within the formal school setting. The voices and ideas of an education team (i.e. teacher and Early Childhood Educator, ECE) and 12 kindergarten students in a Northern Ontario classroom (along with some of the children's primary caregivers) were raised and promoted to add to educator-child attachment discourse. The findings of this study identified four themes that were evident throughout the data collection process and that connected to the topic of child-educator attachment: Physical Proximity, Touch, Attend/Attune/Accept, and Presentation. Beginning with three themes, the working theme of closeness was separated into the themes of Physical Proximity and Touch (despite researchers such as Magro et al., 2023, categorizing them together). Considering Theme 1: Physical Proximity, Rea et al. (2016) linked examples of children keeping a close distance to educators, their awareness of where their educators are in relation to them and moving closer to

the educators to the topic of educator-child relationship development. This research provided examples of each of these within the data collected.

In addition to Theme 1, Physical Proximity, Theme 2, Touch, was also connected to the topic of child-educator attachment. This second theme was supported in the data as it was demonstrated that, like Theme 1, educators became physically close to and/or contacted a child frequently. Examples of both Themes 1 and 2 were offered in deliberate and intentional as well as incidental and without intention. Considering Theme 2: Touch, deliberate offerings were captured in the data through both child seeking (e.g., instigating hugs) and educator delivering (e.g., back rubs). Incidental offerings of touch were less frequently depicted in the data than it was for the first theme and was mostly in the form of offering messages of reassurance to the kindergarten students through light squeezes of the arm. The literature supports acts such as those listed above as actions that build social and emotional bonds between educators and children (Bosmans et al., 2020).

Theme 3: Attend/Attune/Accept was generated following the realization that there were many offerings in the data that (a) proximity and touch were depicted without any evidence the educators were deliberately seeking to address needs of the kindergarten students (or, in other words, were attuned to those needs) and (b) the education team demonstrated attuning to child needs without any physical closeness. To capture (a) and (b) above, Theme 3 was constructed to capture data that exemplified moments of emotional bonds being formed/grown through the use of words and educators demonstrating interest, exhibiting patience, and presenting as excited to children. It is clear that this theme contributes to the current knowledge of educator-child emotional bonds, building on Regueiro et al.'s (2022) claim that being attentive, attuning to, and

accepting children builds a positive emotion state. Moreover, a kindergarten student's emotional state correlates to the emotional bond that is created between them and their educator.

Whereas Theme 3 demonstrates how *adults watch children* to aid in building relationships, Theme 4: Presentation shows how *children watch adults* to the same end. Adding to the current offerings in the literature, this research contributes to the topic of educator-child relationships by highlighting the influence non-direct actions of educators have on the bonds formed within the school setting. Interestingly, although there are studies that indicate students' observations of their educators is connected to their emotional bonds with them (Woods, et al., 2017; Endedijk et al., 2022), this research offers new understanding regarding educators' awareness of indirect messaging to kindergarten students as well as considering all learning exercises as attachment exercises.

Lastly, in relation to this research's contributions to the current state of understanding the topic of educator-child attachment, it would be remiss of me if I did not call attention to the uniqueness of the methodology and methods utilized in the research. Devising and deploying a Creative Appreciative Inquiry was the result of a culmination of consolidating rarities exampled in the literature. On the topic of emotional bonds created between educators and kindergarten students, it is rare in the literature for this topic to be examined using an Appreciative Inquiry (Brunzell et al., 2019), rare that arts-based methods are utilized (Rodríguez-Carrillo et al., 2020), and rare for students to be active participants in the exploration of the topic (Verissimo et al., 2017). Such an effort to combine these components into one study for the purpose of generating new knowledge on the research topic has yet to be featured in the literature.

Answering the Research Questions

The questions that were investigated in this research were rooted in the understanding that children form relationships based on messages of safety, care, and support they receive from their caregiver(s) (Verissimo et al., 2017). Cycling through two 4D processes of the AI framework gave way to the opportunity of considering these questions in two distinct ways. First, during Cycle 1, a more objective position was taken, maintaining a level of curiosity and wonder of what the kindergarten students need, and what the educators do, to promote feelings of safety and care in the classroom. In Cycle 2 however, with the education team now being aware of factors that may be contributing to those feelings, we utilized that knowledge and subjectively considered if factors identified in Cycle 1 continued to be factors in building educator-child attachment. Data analysis resulted in the formation of the four themes, all of which were captured multiple times during each cycle and now informed answers to the questions posed.

Question 1: What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? The draw-and-tell exercises proved to be as informative as I had hoped when considering data collection methods to utilize in this study. Even so, there were fruitful examples pulled from the other data sources that aided in formulating a response to Question 1. Observing the classroom highlighted multiple examples of kindergarten students seeking out ways to build levels of safety and trust with their educators, while the educator interviews offered different knowledge than the observations provided; reflecting on whole histories of their relationships with the child participants. Adding caregiver voices to the study, too, reinforced and provided new insight into

the observations and children's art. All combined, this study provides many rich stories that add to the answering of what children need to feel safe and cared for while with the education team.

Throughout this process there are multiple accounts of kindergarten students seeking to be physically close to educators. Children's desire to be in close proximity to educators while at school is evident in the literature (Magro et al., 2023). Reinforcing what is noted in the literature, this research offers insight into how kindergarten students move to be physically close to their education team to feel emotionally close to them; exemplified data examples of the educators reflecting on Sunny simply wanting to be close to them and in Kal's art by placing Ms. Kent close to them when asked to add the teacher to the artwork.

The kindergarten students' art was also telling when it came to identifying touch as a need of the children to feel safe and cared for. Hunter's art made a clear connection between feeling cared for and being hugged. As well, the observations offered many examples of children seeking touch, just as the example offered of Olsen reaching for Ms. Kent's hand multiple times during the dancing activities. Olsen's need to physically contact their teacher while feeling uncomfortable in the exercise connects directly to them feeling safe with their school caregiver through touch.

The attention of the educators, too, proved to be connected to the kindergarten students' feelings of being cared for while at school. For Asher, as an example, they painted a picture of them closing the door of the classroom, an act of help that has elicited Ms. Kent and Ms. Elden's attention to, attuning, and accepting of them. This point was reinforced by an interview conducted with Asher's caregiver, Annie who noted that Asher seeks the attention of the educators to feel cared for by them. The literature also identifies the link between being attuned to a child and formulating emotional bonds (Weinstein et al., 2023)

Interactions between the Ms. Elden and Hunter offered understandings of how the presentation of the educator can influence kindergarten students' feelings of safety and care. In both the example of Hunter bringing in a toy (deemed dangerous by Ms. Elden) into the play area called "the bear's den" and when Ms. Elden was working with Hunter on coloured patterns, it was clear that Ms. Elden prioritized emotionally connecting with (and so caring for) Hunter above behavioural (e.g., following direction, such as in the first example) and academic (e.g., correcting the pattern, such as in the second example) considerations. In both instances, Hunter's needs were to emotionally connect with the ECE. Following that connection, as was exemplified in the bear's den example, Hunter was then able to carry on with other expectations of the day.

Question 2: How do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting build feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while they are away from their caregivers?

Believing that this research offered multiple means to capture kindergarten students' needs for feeling safe and cared for by their education team while at school, the study offered as many opportunities to build knowledge on how the educators address those needs. Some of the ways educators meet the emotional needs of children is currently captured in the literature. Yet, others seem to be absent from current empirical knowledge. One such example of this is physical proximity-seeking, not of the children, but of the educators, for the purpose of offering messages of safety and care. The example of educator-seeking proximity offered in Chapters 4 and 5, as Ms. Elden maintained a close distance to Taeo following a negative peer interaction, demonstrates a desire in the educator to stay close to Taeo after they had a difficult interaction with a peer, connecting to the identified need of educators being physically close to kindergarten students to aid in feelings of safety and care.

Theme 2: Touch, was also presented in a reciprocal way in this study. Using the example of Olsen's need to hold Ms. Kent's hand while engaged in the dance activity, the teacher was observed as never hesitating in receiving Olsen's hand. While swinging and swaying to the music, and scanning the packed carpet full of kindergarten students also dancing (some more emphatically than others), the teacher met Olsen's need each and every time. The openness of the educators to engage in physical contact with the kindergarten students when their need arises clearly connected to how the education team help build feelings of safety and care in the children.

A captivating part of this research was the realization of how connected, or attuned, the educators were with the children. Reflecting back to bear's den example above, Ms. Elden's ability to accept Hunter's need for her to pay attention to his toy before he moved on and put it away was a clear indicator of her being attuned to Hunter; being aware of his immediate needs to connect with her. When Ms. Elden met that need to feel cared for, Hunter put away the toy and rejoined their fellow bears in the den.

Interestingly, the educators at times seemed to be addressing the needs of safety and care for the kindergarten students without much, if any, conscious effort. This was no truer than when observing moments that relate back to Theme 4: Presentation. During those times, whether it be through direct interaction with a child (such as the pattern-building example between Hunter and Ms. Elden above) or indirect with children observing (such as the example offered in Chapter 4 of student Kayce becoming physical with another child and Ms. Kent intervening with many of Kayce's peers witnessing the event), the educators at times were meeting needs of safety and care in an unplanned way.

When answering the questions of children's needs for safety and care while at school and how teachers meet those needs, close proximity, physical touch, being attentive and accepting, and presenting as caring and safe add to the discourse of children feeling emotionally connected to their education team.

Contributions to the field: Present and future

As a social worker studying within the fields of attachment within the education environment, I believe this research has the ability to contribute to knowledge across academic disciplines. To further knowledge in the various fields of study, the results will be shared with the academic and professional communities of education, social work, and beyond. Publications within academic journals will be sought with regards to the creation of the Creative AI methodology to encourage future researchers to replicate such a process. There is hope, as well, that a publication within the academy that recounts the high level of involvement and engagement demonstrated by the child participants will propel academic researchers to continue to, and improve on, including young children as active participants in qualitative research. Lastly, with regards to contributing to the academy, paper presentations will be offered for attendees of academic conferences both on the national and international levels.

Ayrton (2020) states that using visual and multimodal methods such as comics can offer greater transparency of the research process to a broader audience. As such, a by-product from engaging in this research will be the creation of a comic book that is designed for practitioners in the fields of education, social work, and child psychology that will call particular attention to both (a) educator-initiated attachment seeking and (b) Theme 4: Presentation. Specifically, the connection to educators engaging in learning practices with kindergarten students yet offering both implicit and explicit messages of safety and care will be captured in the comic. In addition

to this, contributions to the practice field will be made through presenting at practice-based provincial conferences and local offerings will be delivered to school boards and children's mental health organizations.

Finally, the stakeholders themselves, including participants and participating school and school board, will be offered a 2-page executive summary of the findings. In addition to this, each participant will be offered a copy of the comic-retelling of Theme 4: Presentation.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Including and beyond dissemination practices, it is my hope that those who interact with this thesis see opportunities for change; to see the results of this study as new building block pieces that can add to positive influences on both research and practice. As this research highlighted children's voices to explore the topic of educator-child attachment, learning from the kindergarten students on what they need to feel safe and cared for while at school can act as a catalyst to advance the provincial kindergarten curriculum to include recognition of the reciprocal and co-constructed nature of building relationships between educator and children. In addition to this, and with regards to Theme 4: Presentation specifically, educators and the professionals that support the creation of relationships between them and children, are encouraged to own a greater awareness in expanding their definition of when relationship building occurs.

Researchers, just like practitioners referred to above, can be informed by the findings of this study, beginning with the opportunity to replicate the findings through research that is congruent with what has been shared in this dissertation. Additional research that utilizes the same processes as illustrated here could further highlight new areas of knowledge, such as educator-seeking attachment and educators appreciating that their presentation is always

relational, regardless of whether the activity has a relational focus. However, continuing to focus on the educator-child relationship topic while adopting varying methodological directions, such as offering a longitudinal study that would not have the same time constraints as a dissertation study, may also build on this research. Variations of methodological approach may also consider sampling practices to be more focused on particular demographics (such as culturally specific areas of focus).

Conclusion

Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry raised kindergarten students' and their educators' voices to be central in the discourse of educator-child attachment. In doing so, two research questions were considered: (1) What do kindergarten students identify as being helpful in the formal education system to increase feelings of safety and care while away from their caregivers? And, (2) how do kindergarten teaching teams in the formal education setting create and sustain feelings of safety and care in kindergarten students while away from their caregivers? Utilizing a qualitative methodology that combined Appreciative Inquiry (an action research model) with arts-based methods, this study presented participants' experiences and understandings in creating and growing relationships within the classroom through a detailed offering of observations, interviews, and art exercises that involved one education team (i.e. teacher and Early Childhood Educator, ECE), 12 kindergarten students and a selection of the children's primary caregivers).

In Chapter 1, rationale was provided for the purpose of the study while also situating me as the researcher within the work being presented. Chapter 2 situated the study within the literature with a particular focus on the theoretical paradigm of attachment and social constructivism while identifying areas of growth within the topic of educator-child emotional bonds. The Creative AI

methodology was thoroughly explored in Chapter 3, with rationale that connected the methods selected to the research topic offered. Chapter 4 delivered the voices of the participants to the reader. Utilizing examples that were identified in the study, the chapter built a story of interacting with the participants and how their stories generated four distinct themes that provided understanding of how kindergarten students and educators build relationships with one another. Building off the findings offered in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 connected the four themes (Physical Proximity, Touch, Attend/Attune/Accept, and Presentation) to what children need to feel safe and cared for while at school, and what the educators do to address those needs. The chapter also explored limitations of this research that derived the presented recommendations to future practice and research. Finally, this sixth and final chapter provided answers to the research questions while also turning the attention towards future education research and practices, including how this research will be disseminated to offer new information for researchers and practitioners to consider.

In Chapter 1, I offered the story of sharing my building blocks robot with my kindergarten teacher all those years ago. Reflecting back, so many memories continue to be vivid: attempting to hide my figurine from my peers until the teacher came to look at it; eyeing another block in the bin that I might use for my next robot; the pain in my arm as my muscles fatigued while I waved my extended arm in the air frantically to get my teacher's attention; and the relief in the moment that I could finally drop my arm because my teacher saw my hand in the air and began to walk toward me. Now, no longer a child, I feel almost the same relief I felt all those years ago. Throughout the latter part of this doctoral process, as the findings emerged from the analysis, I feel as though I have been holding my hand up, wanting others to see, hear, learn from the stories of the participants. Concluding this chapter, and the PhD journey as a whole, I believe my hand

can finally lower as I present this dissertation for others to engage with. Now, back to the bin to start creating my next robot.

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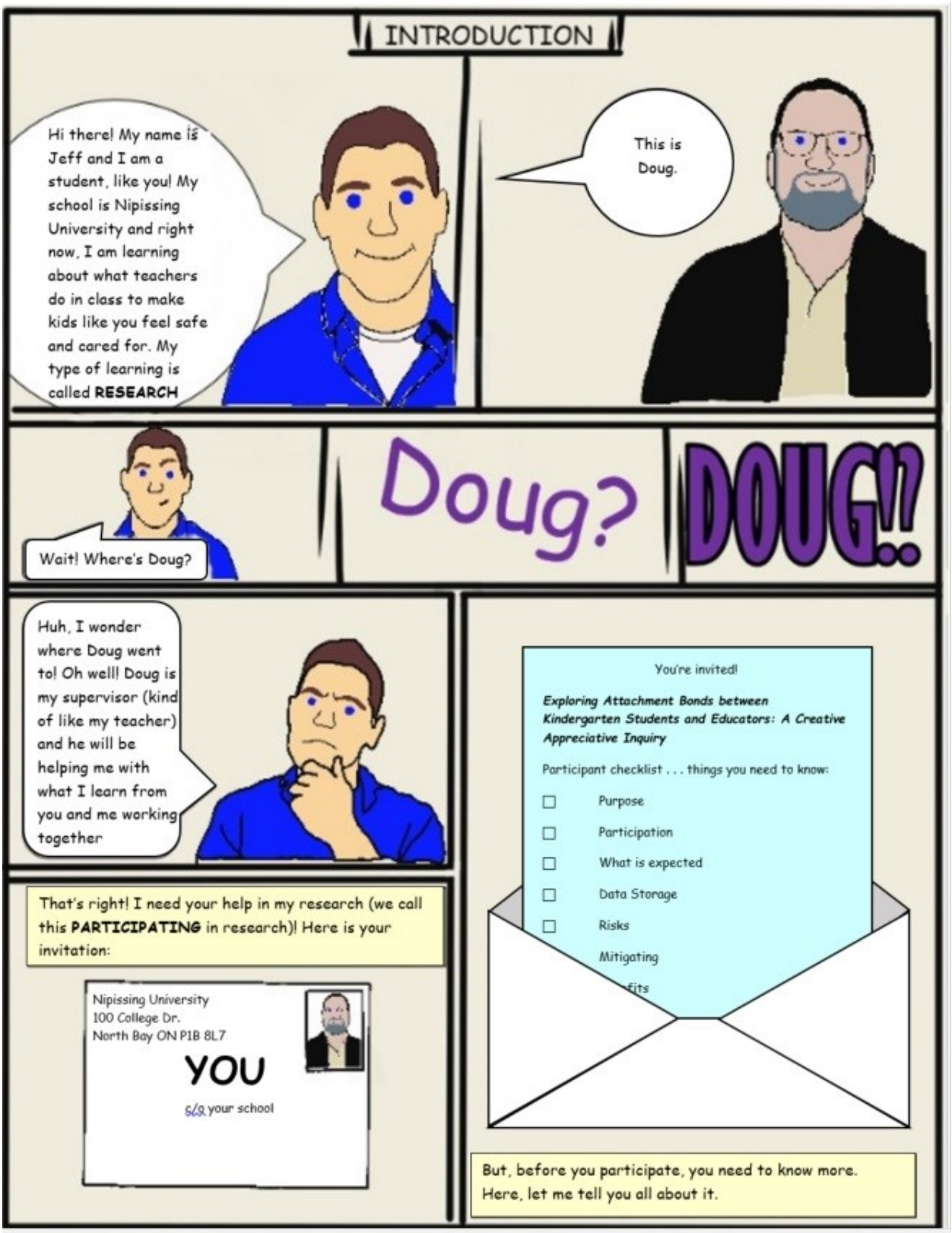
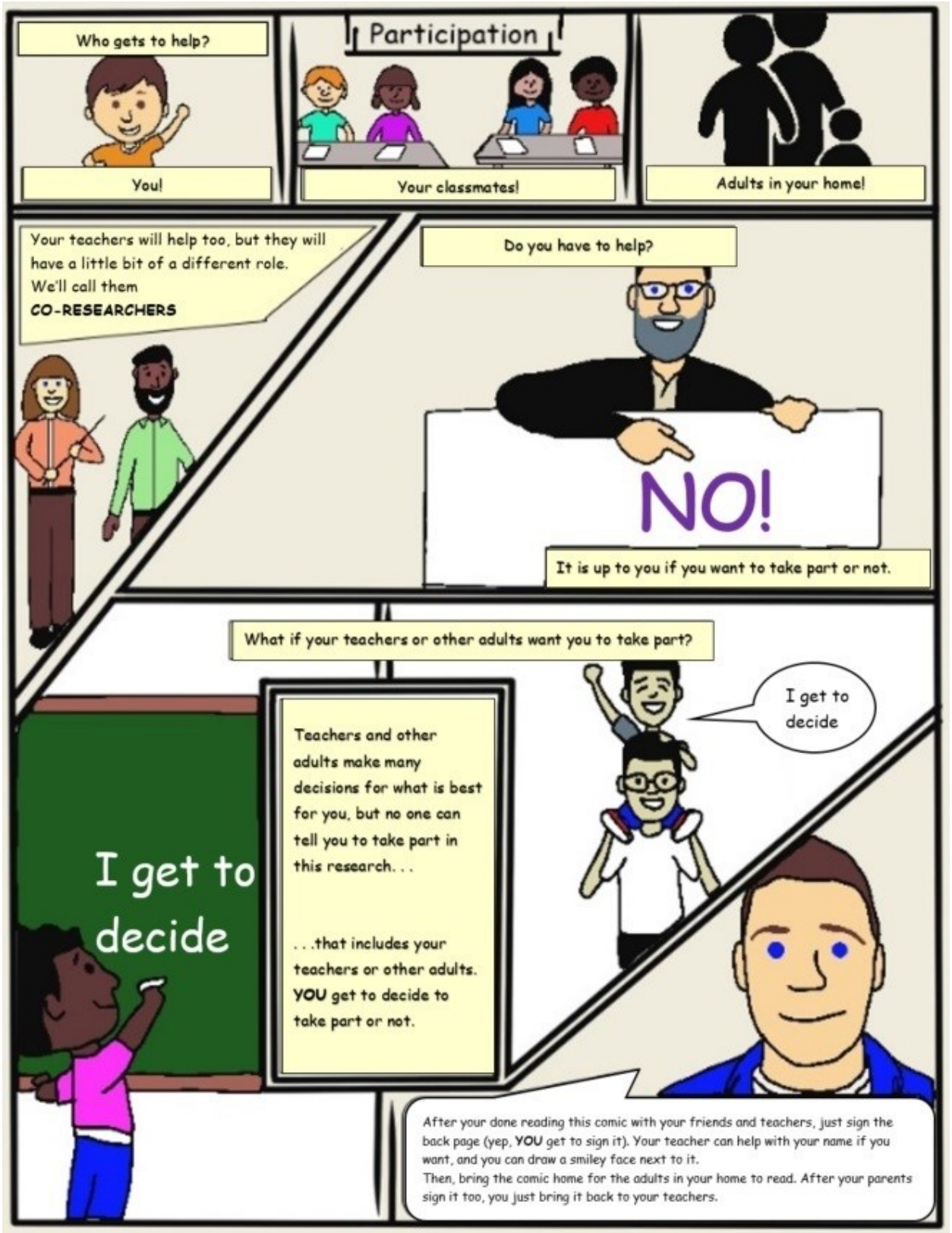
Zheng, S., Ishii, K., Masuda, T., Matsunaga, M., Noguchi, Y., Yamasue, H., & Ohtsubo, Y. (2022). Mu opioid receptor gene (OPRM1) moderates the influence of perceived parental attention on social support seeking. *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology*, *8*(3), 281-295. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40750-022-00192-w

Appendices

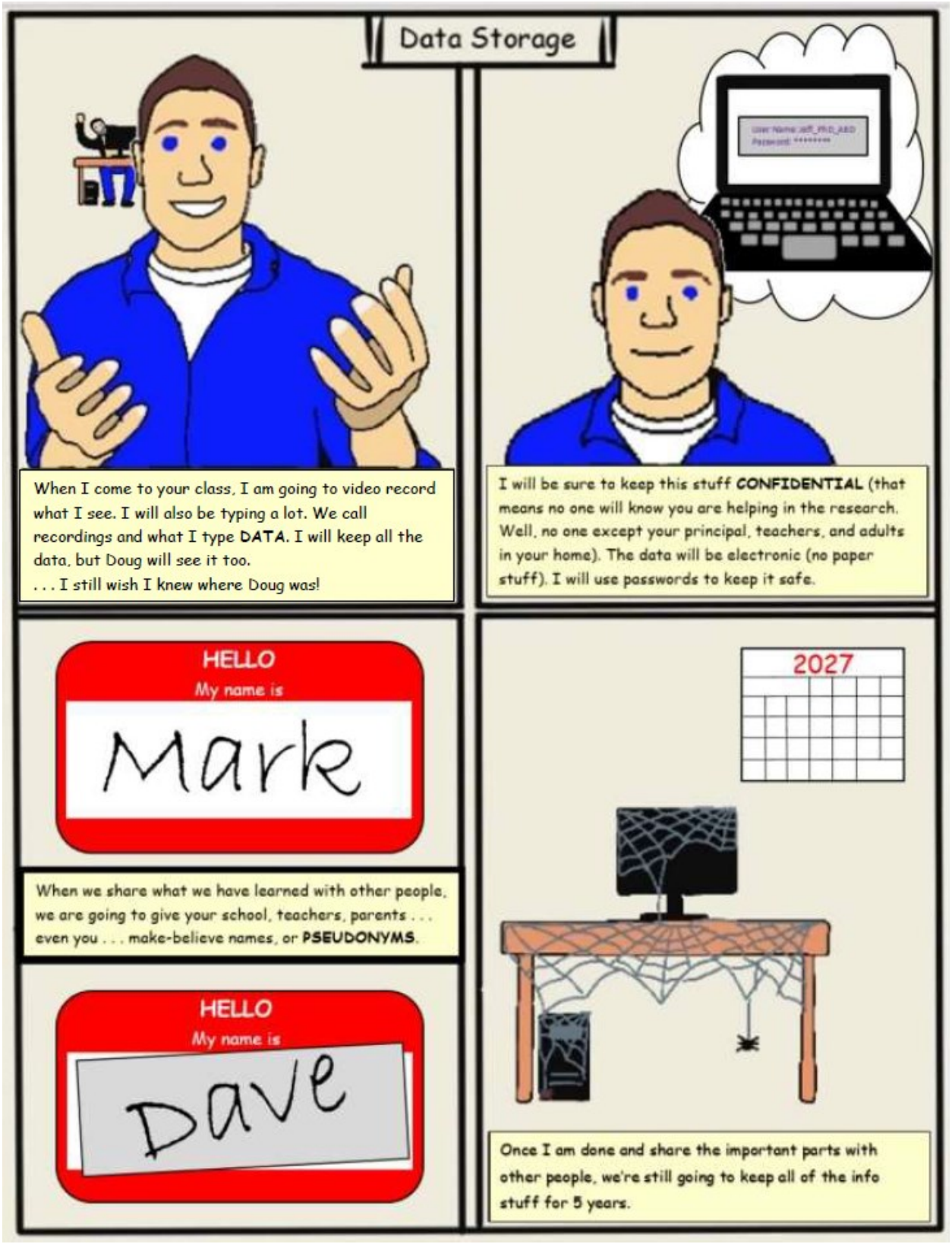
Appendix A: Participant Information Letter and Informed Consent Comic Created for Students

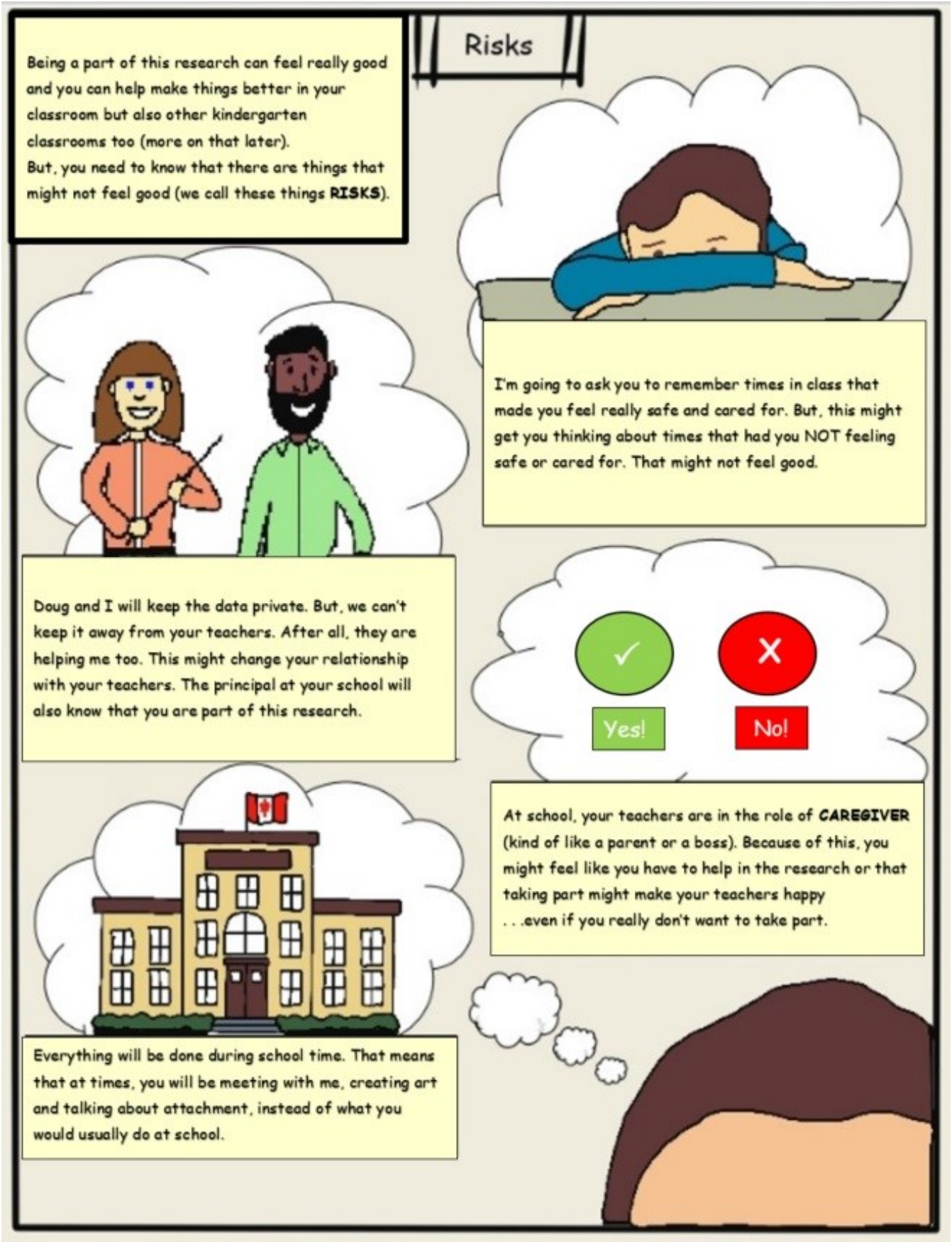



Purpose
My research is on ATTACHMENT. I call the research Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry
ATTACHMENT
Emotionally
Attachment means how a person feels with another person
Socially
Other People have researched this before
But, we want to hear from the students, something that not many have tried to do.
What do YOU think helps you feel safe and cared for when you are at school?
We hope that hearing from you will help us see attachment in new ways.
Now, where is Doug!?
We want to hear from YOU!


Who gets to help?
You!
Participation
Your classmates!
Adults in your home!
Your teachers will help too, but they will have a little bit of a different role. We'll call them CO-RESEARCHERS
Do you have to help?
NO!
It is up to you if you want to take part or not.
What if your teachers or other adults want you to take part?
I get to decide
Teachers and other adults make many decisions for what is best for you, but no one can tell you to take part in this research. . .
. . .that includes your teachers or other adults. YOU get to decide to take part or not.
I get to decide
After your done reading this comic with your friends and teachers, just sign the back page (yep, YOU get to sign it). Your teacher can help with your name if you want, and you can draw a smiley face next to it.
Then, bring the comic home for the adults in your home to read. After your parents sign it too, you just bring it back to your teachers.


What is Expected?
First, make sure you read the rest of this comic.
Then, bring it home so the adults can read and sign it. Once you bring back the part they sign . . .
. . . We're ready to research!
February
March
April
We'll talk a little bit about what attachment is.
Then, you get to create art!
After watching a few times, I will come to your class and..
Sometimes, you will see me in your class. I won't say much, I will just be watching, or OBSERVING, the class. I am going to record these times too.
x2
When you're done, we'll get into small groups so you can share what you created with me!
You'll see me again in a few weeks. I will watch more, we'll do more art and meet in small groups again. I'll meet your teachers and adults in your home to talk about your art. Your teachers and I will look at all the art and talk about some ways to make you feel safe and cared for while you are at school.


Data Storage
When I come to your class, I am going to video record what I see. I will also be typing a lot. We call recordings and what I type DATA. I will keep all the data, but Doug will see it too.
. . . I still wish I knew where Doug was!
I will be sure to keep this stuff CONFIDENTIAL (that means no one will know you are helping in the research. Well, no one except your principal, teachers, and adults in your home). The data will be electronic (no paper stuff). I will use passwords to keep it safe.
HELLO
My name is
Mark
When we share what we have learned with other people, we are going to give your school, teachers, parents . . . even you . . . make-believe names, or PSEUDONYMS.
HELLO
My name is
Dave
2027
Once I am done and share the important parts with other people, we're still going to keep all of the info stuff for 5 years.


Risks
Being a part of this research can feel really good and you can help make things better in your classroom but also other kindergarten classrooms too (more on that later).
But, you need to know that there are things that might not feel good (we call these things RISKS).
I'm going to ask you to remember times in class that made you feel really safe and cared for. But, this might get you thinking about times that had you NOT feeling safe or cared for. That might not feel good.
Doug and I will keep the data private. But, we can't keep it away from your teachers. After all, they are helping me too. This might change your relationship with your teachers. The principal at your school will also know that you are part of this research.
Yes!
No!
At school, your teachers are in the role of CAREGIVER (kind of like a parent or a boss). Because of this, you might feel like you have to help in the research or that taking part might make your teachers happy
. . .even if you really don't want to take part.
Everything will be done during school time. That means that at times, you will be meeting with me, creating art and talking about attachment, instead of what you would usually do at school.

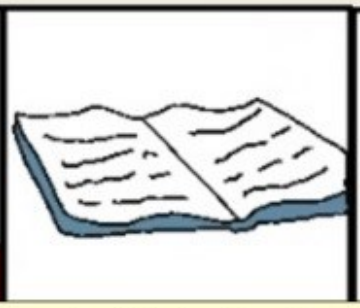

Mitigating
RISK
BUT, we've also come up with some things to make these risks smaller.
RISK
You get to decide to take part and if you want to keep helping. If ever you don't want to take part, simply let any adult know.
RISK
When we meet, you can always take some time to cool off. If ever you feel big emotions and need a break, we won't rush you. Take your time.
RISK
Your school also has people who are there to help when you get really big emotions. Your teachers will tell you who they are and how you can meet with them.
RISK
Our meetings won't take all day. We'll keep them short and sweet and no more than 15 minutes per activity (except when I am watching the classroom).
RISK
Don't forget, we're going give everyone make-believe names. Also, we're using passwords to stop anyone from looking at the data.
RISK
You will always be with your friends and classmates. You will never be asked to be by yourself or with me or the teachers by yourself.
RISK
If ever you don't get something that is going on, let us know and we'll help so that you understand.

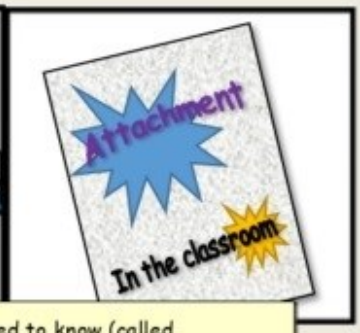
Benefits

Being in research can be really good. Here are some good things that can happen:

You get your voice heard! This type of research (called **APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY**) has never been used with art to learn from students. You get to share (and show us with your art) what helps you feel safe and cared for while at school.

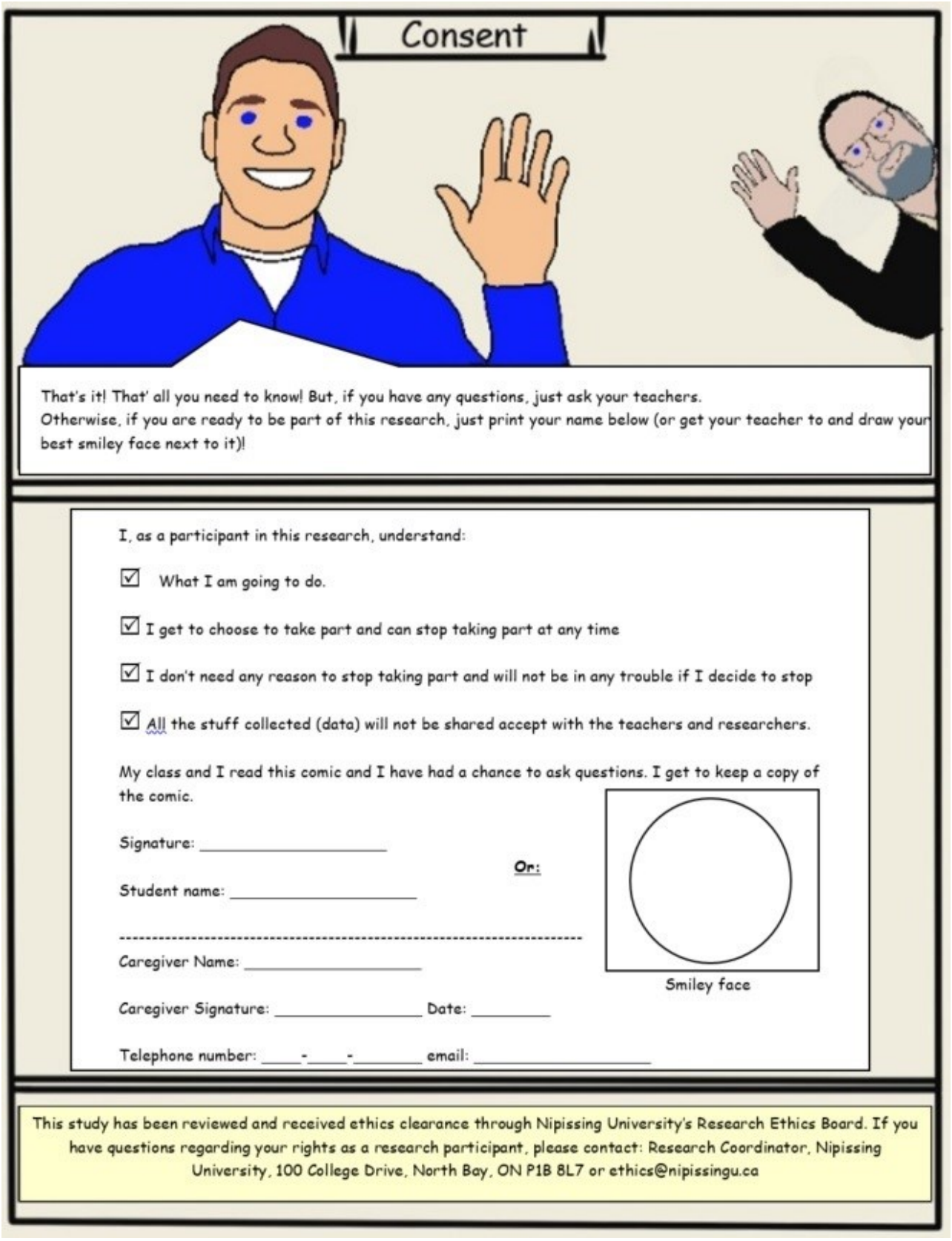
Sharing what your teachers do to make you feel safe can change your classroom. So, we're hoping to hear the good things happening for *you* so that they can happen more *in the class*!





Your voice can change other classrooms too. The important stuff that people really need to know (called **FINDINGS**), are going to be shared (don't worry, we're going to keep all the make-believe names):

1. First, findings will be shared in my **DISERTATION**. That's when I share all the stuff I learned with Doug and a couple other people as part of me becoming a doctor (now if I could just find Doug)!
2. I am also going to share in journals (kind of like magazines) and presentations. These things will help get the word out about what I learned.
3. Lastly, I am going to create my own comic book! The comic will share all the research that we have done. This will be another way to spread the word and have other classes learn what we did. Want a copy? I'll let you know when it's done and share it with you!


Consent
That's it! That' all you need to know! But, if you have any questions, just ask your teachers.
Otherwise, if you are ready to be part of this research, just print your name below (or get your teacher to and draw your best smiley face next to it)!
I, as a participant in this research, understand:
☑ What I am going to do.
☑ I get to choose to take part and can stop taking part at any time
☑ I don't need any reason to stop taking part and will not be in any trouble if I decide to stop
☑ All the stuff collected (data) will not be shared accept with the teachers and researchers.
My class and I read this comic and I have had a chance to ask questions. I get to keep a copy of the comic.
Signature: _____
Or:
Student name: _____
Caregiver Name: _____
Smiley face
Caregiver Signature: _____ Date: _____
Telephone number: ____-____-_____ email: _____
This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact: Research Coordinator, Nipissing University, 100 College Drive, North Bay, ON P1B 8L7 or ethics@nipissingu.ca

Appendix B: Participant Information Letter and Informed Consent Document Created for Educators

Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry

CONTENTS

1. WHAT IS THE STUDY?

You and your classroom colleague are being invited to take part in a research study for my PhD dissertation. I want to highlight students' voices on the topic of attachment (in other words, the relationships between educators and students that are made at school).

2. WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?

I will connect with the classroom for:

1. *Classroom observations*. I will observe and take notes of the classroom 6 times during regular day activities.
2. *Two classroom discussions, art exercises, and small focus groups*. Students will: (a) discuss what attachment is, (b) create an art piece that helps them show what attachment means to them, and (c) describe the art they have created (in small groups).
3. *Semi-structured interviews*. I will connect with the education team (3 times) and some caregivers (2 times). When I meet with you, I want to get your thoughts on the students' art. We'll make sure that we find a time that is convenient for you.

3. HOW WILL THE DATA BE USED?

Data gathered will be used in my doctoral dissertation, in conferences/workshops, and in creating a comic book that will be published.

4. WHAT ARE THE RISKS TO PARTICIPATING?

Risks might include: you or some students experiencing difficult emotions, school administration knowing you are participating, and/or feeling like you have to participate.

5. HOW ARE THE RISKS ADDRESSED?

(a) Participation is voluntary,
(b) You can withdrawal at any time,
(c) Names of all participants, the school and the school board will not be mentioned in any publication,
(d) "Cooling off" periods will be offered if needed, and
(e) All data collected will be housed within Nipissing University property (i.e. laptop; USB storage key), stored under two passwords.

6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO THIS RESEARCH

(a) Hearing from children in research helps us learn from them on their needs while at school,
(b) We will better know what actions at school help students feel supported and cared for, and
(c) Using art can reach a wider audience, larger than the school and university communities, to share what we learn from the research.

NOTE: Consent form is located on the back page of this document

1. WHAT IS THE STUDY?

Before you decide to participate in this study, I would like to share with you details about the research. Afterwards, if you have any questions or need more information, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Douglas Gosse. Our contact information is at the end of this document.

This study is about attachment bonds between kindergarten students and their education teams (*education teams* are the classroom teacher and Early Childhood Educator [ECE]). Highlighting students' voices, I want to learn how attachments are formed in the classroom. Including children is important for future education and learning. Children begin to create attachments very early in life. But, as kids go into new environments (like school), and meet new adults (like teachers), there attachment needs can change. This research will look children's attachment needs while at school through art exercises, something that hasn't been done very often in research.

2. WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?

During this research, I will connect with the classroom through:

1. *Six Classroom observations*. Each observation will be about 60 minutes and will be audio and video recorded so that I can re-review them at a later date (if you are concerned with privacy, please see the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected* section below). The observations will be during regular school activities. I won't interact with the class directly, but I will take notes while observing.
2. *Two classroom exercises: discussions, art exercises, and small focus groups*. Starting with a 15 minute discussion that involves the whole class talking about attachment, students will then be given 15 minutes or so to create art that shows their attachment with the education team (using art supplies that are available to them in the classroom). Then, in small groups, students will share with me and other students the art they create. The small group exercises should take about 15 minutes as well.
3. *Semi-structured interviews*. I will connect with you and the other education team member 3 times. Interviews will be separate from regular school activities and will not disrupt the class. One interview will be to plan for data collection. The other two interviews will be to review students' art and put them into categories according to theme. Each meeting will take about 90 minutes.

I am also looking to interview caregivers via Zoom. Caregivers will be selected according to the theme of their child's art. During that time, I will share and get caregivers' thoughts on their child's art. Including caregivers can be positive for a child's experience with research.

3. DATA: HOW WILL IT BE USED and HOW WILL IT BE PROTECTED?

The data collected will be analyzed for my Doctoral dissertation. I will also look to publish findings in academic journals and/or present at conferences. In addition, I will be using the data to create a comic book that will be published.

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law, professional practice, and ethical codes of conduct. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data are in transit over the Internet, but I will make every effort to protect your information, including:

- Participant, School, and School Board names will not be listed, using pseudonyms instead.

- Identifying details will not be released in any transcripts, publications or presentations. For example, the location of research will be described as "in a Northern Ontario school board."
- All data will be kept within Nipissing University property using passwords (i.e. a password protected file folder and laptop). Physical data (like this document and the artwork) will be converted to digital format, then destroyed. Data will be stored 5 years after my PhD defense.

4. WHAT RISKS ARE THERE TO PARTICPATING?

Participating in research can be rewarding. But, there are potential risks too. These risks include:

- You will be asked about and to share classroom actions that influence educator/student attachment. This might have you recalling difficult times that bring up emotions like embarrassment or distress. You might see this topic as personal as well.
- The school principal will know about your participation in the study. This may impact the employee/employer relationship.
- Due to the principal's position of authority, you may believe you *have* to participate or that you *have to continue* to participate once research has begun.
- Data collection will be held inside of your working hours. The study may impact your ability to tend to other daily duties.

5. HOW ARE THE RISKS ADDRESSED?

- Participation is voluntary. Please see the *Do I have to Participate?* Section below.
- If any participant expresses distress (either verbally or through non-verbal physical cues), they can have a "cooling off" time. They can decide how much time they need.
- All data collection will not go over the time noted in the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected?* section above.
- Other than the school administration, parents, and students, participant information will be protected (see the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected?* section above).
- It will be helpful to get familiar with your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and other community supports/persons you can access if you experience emotional difficulty. For children, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions can be reached at 1-800-461-4236. For adults, Community Mental Health Association can be reached at 1-800-245-5036.

6. ARE THERE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATING?

There are no financial or physical benefits to participating, but some potential benefits to you and your child include:

- Offering different ways for students to express themselves and share their voice on feeling safe and cared for at school can help us understand attachment.
- Capturing student voice can help build a new future for educators and students that provides more opportunity for relationships to grow. This research will include caregivers, students, and the education team; all participating to build classroom culture together.
- Research using art can reach an audience larger than the school and university communities.

DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign the consent portion of this form below and provide your email and phone number for future contact. You are free to withdraw at any time without consequence. All you have to do is call or email me using the information provided below. No reason needs to be given. If you withdraw from the study before

data collection is done, I will use what has been collected for data analysis but no future data will be collected from you or the classroom setting.

CONSENT

I, as a participant in this research study, clearly understand what I am agreeing to do, and that I am free to decline my involvement (or to withdraw myself) from this project at any time without reason and without consequence. I understand that steps are being taken to protect my privacy and the privacy of all participants. I have read the Information Letter, including this Legal Guardian(s) Consent Statement, and have been given the opportunity to have any questions, concerns or complaints answered to my satisfaction. I have been provided a copy of this letter. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's name _____

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Participant's phone number _____-_____-_____ and email _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Ethics clearance statement

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact: Research Coordinator, Nipissing University, 100 College Drive, North Bay, ON P1B 8L7 or ethics@nipissingu.ca

Any other questions regarding the study, including enrolment, please contact:

Jeff Thornborrow Dr. Douglas Gosse
[redacted]

Appendix C: Participant Information Letter and Informed Consent Document Created for Caregivers

Exploring Attachment Bonds between Kindergarten Students and Educators: A Creative Appreciative Inquiry

CONTENTS

1. WHAT IS THE STUDY?

You and your child are being invited to take part in a research study for my PhD dissertation. I want to highlight students' voices on the topic of attachment (in other words, the relationships that are made at school between educators and students).

2. WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?

I will connect with the classroom for:

1. *Classroom observations*. I will observe and take notes of the classroom 6 times during regular activities.
2. *Two classroom discussions, art exercises, and small focus groups*. Students will: (a) discuss what attachment is, (b) create an art piece that helps them show what attachment means to them, and (c) describe the art they have created (in small groups).
3. *Semi-structured interviews*. I will connect with the education team (3 times) and caregivers (2 times). If you and your child are selected to meet, I want to get your thoughts on your child's art. We'll make sure that we find a time that is convenient for you.

3. HOW WILL WE USE THE DATA?

Data gathered will be used in my doctoral dissertation, in conferences/workshops, and in creating a comic book that will be published.

4. WHAT ARE THE RISKS TO PARTICIPATING?

You or your child might recall difficult emotions when taking part in the research or feel like you have to participate, and the teaching team will know you are participating.

5. HOW WE ARE ADDRESSING THE RISKS?

(a) Participation is voluntary,
(b) You or your child can withdrawal at any time,
(c) You and your child's name, along with the school and the school board, will not be used in any publication,
(d) "Cooling off" periods will be offered if needed, and
(e) All data collected will be stored with Nipissing University property (i.e. laptop; USB storage key) under two passwords.

6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO THIS RESEARCH?

(a) Hearing from children in research helps us learn from them on their needs while at school,
(b) We will better know what actions at school help students feel supported and cared for, and

(c) Using art can reach a wider audience, larger than the school and university communities, to share what we learn from the research.

NOTE: Consent form is included with your child's information comic

1. WHAT IS THE STUDY?

Before you decide to participate in this study, I would like to share with you details about the research. Afterwards, if you have any questions or need more information, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Douglas Gosse. Our contact information is at the end of this document.

This study is about attachment bonds between kindergarten students and their education teams (*education teams* are the classroom teacher and Early Childhood Educator [ECE]). Highlighting students' voices, I want to learn how attachments are formed in the classroom. Including children is important for future education and learning. Children begin to create attachments very early in life. But, as kids go into new environments (like school), and meet new adults (like teachers), there attachment needs can change. This research will look children's attachment needs while at school through art exercises, something that hasn't been done very often in research.

2. WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THE STUDY?

During this research, I will connect with the classroom through:

1. *Six Classroom observations*. Each observation will be about 60 minutes and will be audio and video recorded so that I can re-review them at a later date (if you are concerned with privacy, please see the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected* section below). The observations will be during regular school activities. I won't interact with the class directly, but I will take notes while observing.
2. *Two classroom exercises: discussions, art exercises, and small focus groups*. Starting with a whole-class discussion about attachment that will take about 15 minutes, students will then create art that shows their attachment with the education team (using art supplies that are available to them in the classroom). These art exercises will be 15 minutes each. Then, in small groups that will take another 15 minutes, students will share with me and other students the art they create.
3. *Semi-structured interviews*. I will connect with the education team 3 times. Interviews will be separate from regular school activities and shouldn't impact your child's day. The education team and I will look at and talk about students' art. We'll then put them into categories according to theme.

I am also looking to interview caregivers. Caregivers will be selected according to the theme of their child's art. The number of student participants will be capped at 12. If you are selected for the interviews, we can find a time that works with your schedule. Each interview will take about 45 minutes. During that time, I will share and get your thoughts on your child's art. Including caregivers can be positive for a child's experience with research.

3. DATA: HOW WILL IT BE USED and HOW WILL IT BE PROTECTED?

The data collected will be analyzed for my Doctoral dissertation. I will also look to publish findings in academic journals and/or present at conferences. In addition, I will be using the data to create a comic book that will be published.

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law, professional practice, and ethical codes of conduct. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed while data are in transit over the Internet, but I will make every effort to protect your information, including:

- Participant, School, and School Board names will not be listed, using pseudonyms instead.
- Identifying details will not be released in any transcripts, publications or presentations. For example, the location of research will be described as "in a Northern Ontario school board."
- All data will be kept within Nipissing University property using passwords (i.e. a password protected file folder and laptop). Physical data (like this document and the artwork) will be converted to digital format, then destroyed. Data will be stored 5 years after my PhD defense.

4. WHAT RISKS ARE THERE TO PARTICPATING?

Participating in research can be rewarding. But, there are potential risks too. These risks include:

- Your child will be asked about and will share times they felt safe and cared for at school. This might have you recalling difficult times that bring up emotions like embarrassment or distress. Students might see this topic as personal as well.
- If interviewed, you will be asked to reflect on your child's art. This might trigger difficult emotions or recalling times your child didn't feel safe. You also might see this topic as personal.
- The education team will be aware of your participation. They will help coordinate research activities and with sorting the art into themes. This might impact/change relationships.
- Due to age differences and positions of authority/caregiving, students may believe they *have* to participate or that they *have to continue* to participate once research has begun.

5. HOW ARE THE RISKS ADDRESSED?

- Participation is voluntary. Please see the *Do I or My Child have to Participate?* Section below.
- If any participant expresses distress (either verbally or through non-verbal physical cues), they can have a "cooling off" time. They can decide how much time they need.
- Data collection will be kept to the time noted in the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected?* section above.
- Students will be made aware that the education team knows they are participating.
- Other than the education team and school administration, participate information will be protected (see the *Data: How will it be Used and How will it be Protected?* section above).
- The education team will introduce students to school support persons (e.g. Child Development Counselor [CDC]) and remind them of those persons during any times of distress.
- It's helpful to think of community supports/persons you can access if you experience emotional difficulty. For children, Simcoe Muskoka Family Connexions can be reached at 1-800-461-4236. For adults, Community Mental Health Association can be reached at 1-800-245-5036.
- To avoid concerns of feeling like you or your child have to participate, it's important to note:
    - I have a history of working with kindergarten children in a therapeutic setting, making sure that children's expression of consent is meaningful.
    - Students will always be with other students during the study.
    - You and your child will receive a comics-based information document that outlines all information in this letter. Here is a read-along video: https://youtu.be/EsPQgwcd__s
    - I will make sure everything is easy to understand and presented as friendly and open.
    - Art gives children a chance to communicate and share information without talking.

6. ARE THERE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPATING?

There are no financial or physical benefits to participating, but some potential benefits to you and your child include:

- Offering different ways for students to express themselves and share their voice on feeling safe and cared for at school can help us understand attachment.
- Capturing student voice can help build a new future for educators and students that provides more opportunity for relationships to grow. This research will include the education team, students, and caregivers such as yourself; all participating to build classroom culture together.
- Research using art can reach an audience larger than the school and university communities.

DO I OR MY CHILD HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, you will be asked to sign the consent portion of your child's information comic and provide your email and phone number for future contact. You are free to withdraw yourself and your child at any time without consequence. All you have to do is call or email me using the information provided below. No reason needs to be given. Your child will still take part in the activities, but no more data will be collected from them and any data in which your child played a main role will be destroyed.

CONSENT

Before signing the comic, please read the following statement:
I, as a participant and as a legal caregiver of the child participating in this research study, clearly understand what I am agreeing to do, and that I am free to decline or withdrawal my or my child's involvement in this project at any time, without reason, and without consequence. I understand that steps are being taken to protect my and my child's privacy. I have read this information letter and my child's information comic and have been given the opportunity to have any questions, concerns or complaints answered. Please keep this letter for your records.

Ethics clearance statement

This study has received ethics clearance through Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact: Research Coordinator, Nipissing University, 100 College Drive, North Bay, ON P1B 8L7 or ethics@nipissingu.ca

Any other questions regarding the study, including enrolment, please contact:

Jeff Thornborrow Dr. Douglas Gosse
[redacted]

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview with Education Team 1:

Purpose:

1. Role definition including identifying the teaching team as co-researchers (an essential step to create a sense of co-ownership of the study [Coleman & Wiggins, 2017]).
2. Act as an exercise in continuing to build collegiality and rapport; both with the education team and setting groundwork in future rapport building with students (Tezcan-Unal, 2018).
3. Explore various elements of the research topic and process.
4. Will evolve the research design to meet the needs of the participants and to address the research questions more fully (Reed, 2006).
5. Allow for the teacher and ECE, co-researchers that own insider knowledge, to identify any foreseeable hurdles or obstacles moving forward in the research (Gallagher et al., 2019).
6. Define key concepts that link to attachment from the affirmative position (i.e. what the teacher and ECE see as benefiting and building a relationship of care and safety with each of their students [Meier & Geldenhuys, 2017]).

Question Guide:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 3:

- What is attachment to you?
- What factors contribute to child/caregiver attachment?

Purpose 4:

- Let's review the projected data collection methods. What to you like about the plan in its current state? Would you like to see some things change/be different? What? For what purpose?

Purpose 5:

- Do you see any concerns that might arise in the data collection process? What? What ideas might you have in addressing these concerns?
- Are their any dynamic issues that you think I should be aware of before moving forward with data collection? What? What ideas might your have in addressing these issues?

Purpose 6:

- tell me what you think about educator-child relationships by describing chosen events from your personal and professional life.
- using examples from your professional life, how would you describe the terms "safe" and "cared for" in the context of children being in the formal education system?

Classroom Observations 1-3:

Purpose:

1. All participants being observed (i.e. teaching team and students) will be asked to conduct regularly scheduled activities with no direct interaction with the researcher. The observations will aid in building additional knowledge on how teachers form positive connections with their students (Carbonneau et al., 2020).

2. Observation days and times will be purposefully selected and agreed to during the semi-structured interview with the education team 1 (see above) to provide the greatest opportunity to view relationship building/strengthening (Carbonneau et al., 2020).

Question Guide:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Classroom Discussion and Brainstorming Session 1:

Purpose:

1. Further build the socially constructed concepts of attachment first created during the semi-structured interview with the education team 1 (see above).
2. Provide a pathway to constructing kindergarten students' concept definitions and meaningful participation in research (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017).

Question Guide:

Purpose 1:

- Questions pertaining to this section may be adapted using responses from the education team during the semi-structured interview with the education team 1 (see above). However, it will be important for the students to explore the following:
    - What does safe mean?
    - How do you know when you feel safe?
    - When do you feel safe at school?
    - What makes you feel safe at school?
    - What does (teacher and ECE) do to make you feel safe?
    - What does caring for someone mean?
    - How do you know when someone cares about you?
    - When do you feel cared for at school?
    - What makes you feel like you are cared for at school?
    - What does (teacher and ECE) do to make you feel cared for?

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Draw-and-Tell Exercise 1:

Purpose:

1. Students will be prompted to visually express the key concepts they identified in Classroom Discussion and Brainstorming Session 1 that have them feeling safe and cared for while at school.
2. Utilizing art to offer greater opportunity to communicate with children (Cologon et al., 2019)
3. An opportunity for students to explore the topic visually, offering different and deeper responses from children (Lawrence et al., 2017).
4. To leave space for children to verbally explore their interpretation of what they have created with their art (Wall, 2017).
5. To allow the children to socially construct a shared dream of what their classroom looks like when they are given messages of caring and safety (Gray et al., 2019), the "tell" portion of this exercise will be conducted openly with other students observing.

6. An added element to the small group activity is to ensure I understand their art the way they hoped. Member checking is a vital part of conducting research with children (Cowie & Khoo, 2017).

Question Guide:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 3:

- What makes you feel safe at school?
- What makes you feel like you are cared for at school?
- I want you to create a picture that shows me a time that you felt safe or that you were cared for while you were at school.

Purpose 4:

- Tell me what you created.

Purpose 5:

- Does anyone else here feel safe/cared for when (insert topic of art creation) happens?
- Does (student)'s art remind you of a time you felt safe or that you felt like someone cared for you at school?

Purpose 6:

- Oh, okay. I see. Your picture is showing _____. Is that right?

Semi-Structured Interview with Education Team 2:

Purpose:

1. The education team will be reengaged as co-researchers, asking them to aid in analysing and interpreting the data (i.e., the observations, art, and draw-and-tell feedback) to begin to thread common themes together (following Braun and Clarke's [2006] stages of thematic analysis as cited in Maguire & Delahunt [2017].
2. Look to interpret and make sense of the data collected; using myself and the education team as instruments of research.
3. Beginning the thematic analysis on both the semantic (through small group interviews) and latent (via observations and art creation) levels (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017); providing a thorough and rich review and interpretation of the data.
4. Beginning in this activity, and in keeping with Cole and Knowles (2008) vision of AIR, the steps that are needed to promote and grow the positives in the classroom will need to be constructed within the data analysis process.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 3:

- Let's review my notes from the observations, each piece of art, and the student's corresponding draw-and-tell feedback. (Step 1: become familiar with the data)

- Considering what we just explored, are you seeing any commonalities or similarities in what the students shared? What? Did we see this in the observation data as well? Where? (Step 2: generate initial codes)
- We've identified some similarities in the data, do you think we can fit these into categories? What would they be? What would you call them? (Step 3: search for themes)
- Let's take a birds-eye view. What do we think about the categories we've created? Do they fit? Thinking back to the observation notes, art, and draw-and-tell feedback, is there something missing? What? (Step 4: review themes)
- Bringing this back to our topic of attachment and concepts of safety and care in the classroom, how do our categories fit? Are they connected to our topic? How so? Are they connected to each other? How so? (Step 5: define themes)

Purpose 4:

- Considering the themes we are beginning to see in the data, what do you think the next steps are?
- Do you see it influencing the classroom setting? How so? What will be different?

Semi-Structured Interview with Caregivers 1:

Purpose:

1. Capturing the caregivers' voice in their child's art creation.
2. To have positive effects on deepening the child's experience within the study and can become part of the child's life narrative (Clark, 2017).
3. Mitigates concern of caregivers acting as gatekeepers to their child's voice (Cowie & Khoo, 2017).

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 3:

- What is attachment to you?
- What factors contribute to child/caregiver attachment?
- How would you describe the terms "safe" and "cared for" in the context of children being in the formal education system?
- Tell me what you think about educator-child relationships. What do you think helps them grow?
- When you look at your child's art, what do you notice?
- When I spoke to (child), they told me that the art shows . . .
    - What are your thoughts on this?
    - Has (child) ever discussed this at home? In what context?
    - Can you relate this to what you mentioned earlier about attachment and children feeling safe and cared for while at school?

Classroom Observations 4-6:

1. Classroom Observations 4-6 will replicate the process captured in Classroom Observations 1-3 above; classroom observations as a means of further discovering ways the education team offers messages of safety and care to the students.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Classroom Discussion and Brainstorming Session 2:

Purpose:

1. As with Classroom Discussion and Brainstorming Session 1, Classroom Discussion and Brainstorming Session 2 will connect directly with the students.
2. Classroom discussion that will re-explore the children's concepts of safety and care.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- No questions are required.

Purpose 2:

- Do you remember what we talked about the last time we met? What?
- Last time, we talked about what safe means. Here are some things you told me (review past classroom discussion).
    - What else do you think of when you hear the word safe?
    - How do you know when you feel safe?
    - Do you feel safe at school?
    - What makes you feel safe at school?
- Last time, we also talked about what caring for someone means. Here are some things you told me (review past classroom discussion).
    - What else do you think of when you think of someone being cared for?
    - How do you know when someone cares about you?
    - Do you feel cared for at school?
    - What makes you feel like you are cared for at school?

Draw-and-Tell Exercise 2:

Purpose:

1. An arts-creation exercise.
2. To further socially constructed concepts of attachment in the classroom.
3. Member checking will also be included in this exercise.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- What makes you feel safe at school?
- What makes you feel like you are cared for at school?
- I want you to create a picture that shows me a time that you felt safe or that you were cared for while you were at school.

Purpose 2:

- Tell me what you created.
- Does anyone else here feel safe/cared for when (insert topic of art creation) happens?

- Does (student)'s art remind you of a time you felt safe or that you felt like someone cared for you at school?

Purpose 3:

- Oh, okay. I see. Your picture is showing _____. Is that right?

Semi-Structured Interview with Education Team 3:

Purpose:

1. As highlighted in Semi-Structured Interview with Education Team 2 above, Semi-Structured Interview with Education Team 3 will incorporate a thematic analysis to analyze the data with the teaching team acting as co-researchers.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- Let's review my notes from the second set of observations, the new art pieces, and the student's corresponding draw-and-tell feedback. (Step 1: become familiar with the data)
- Considering what we just explored, are you seeing any commonalities or similarities in what the students shared? What? Did we see this in the observation data as well? Where? (Step 2: generate initial codes)
- When we met during our last interview, we identified some categories in the data, do you think we can fit these new similarities into those categories? Where would they fit? Do some not fit? Which ones? Do you see any new categories emerging? (Step 3: search for themes)
- Let's take a birds-eye view. What do we think about the categories we've created? Do they fit? Referring back to the new observation notes, art pieces, and draw-and-tell feedback, is there something missing? What? (Step 4: review themes)
- Bringing this back to our topic of attachment and concepts of safety and care in the classroom, how do our categories fit? Are they connected to our topic? How so? Are they connected to each other? How so? (Step 5: define themes)
- Do you see it influencing the classroom setting? How so? What will be different?

Semi-Structured Interview with Caregivers 2:

Purpose:

1. Because of the random selection of caregiver participation, it is likely that this will be the first interview for caregivers. As such, the questions will be either (a) repeated from Semi-Structured Interview with Caregivers 1 or (b) slightly adapted as to not completely replicate questions of parents who were part of the first interview.

Questions:

Purpose 1:

- What is attachment to you?
- What factors contribute to child/caregiver attachment?
- How would you describe the terms "safe" and "cared for" in the context of children being in the formal education system?
- Tell me what you think about educator-child relationships. What do you think helps them grow?
- When you look at your child's art, what do you notice?
- When I spoke to (child), they told me that the art shows . . .
    - What are your thoughts on this?

- Has (child) ever discussed this at home? In what context?
- Can you relate this to what you mentioned earlier about attachment and children feeling safe and cared for while at school?