Cross-cultural perceptions of teachers’ responsibilities towards fostering meaningful relationships with students: a glimpse at Canada and Japan

By

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ABSTRACT

The guidance teachers provide in the school environment reaches far beyond the scope of content delivery. To promote student achievement, they become mentors and leaders, embracing non-instructional roles to better understand student needs and effectively support them in reaching goals (Ayers, 2010; hooks, 2003). To gain a deeper understanding of the factors and influences that impact student outcomes and success, I embarked on a research study that examines the relationship between school personnel and the student. Beyond Ontario classrooms exists a wide array of celebrated pedagogical strategies. My time working as a high school English teacher in Shizuoka, Japan from 2011 to 2014, exposed me to an educational system unlike the one I experienced growing up in Toronto, Canada. I conducted a cross-cultural research study of the student-teacher relationship in two vastly different yet renowned educational frameworks found in Canadian and Japanese schools. I interviewed four experienced high school teachers—2 in Canada and 2 in Japan—on how they perceive and exercise responsibilities towards fostering meaningful, mentoring relationships with students both inside and outside of the classroom. Findings highlight similarities and differences in approaches towards educating the whole student in the diverse cultural contexts. Results indicate key differences in structurally integrated mentorship versus embracing the role from personal willingness.

Keywords: student-teacher relationship, student growth, mentorship, care, Ontario, Canada, Shizuoka, Japan
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Research context

The relationship between student and teacher affects all educational professionals. Diverse teaching styles, school settings, and mentoring practices, generate different views on how best to approach this relationship. As public servants, teachers are entrusted with fostering a safe and secure learning environment for students, and have professional, ethical, and legal responsibilities towards them (Scarfo & Zuker, 2011). Paired with these duties, teachers also have a commitment towards promoting and encouraging student achievement. They become mentors and leaders, embracing non-instructional roles to better understand student needs and fully support them in reaching goals (Ayers, 2010; hooks, 2003). During school hours, teachers prescribe to civic duties by effectively delivering curriculum content and doing their best to ensure the comfort and safety of students. Outside of school hours, teachers may devote time and energy to provide students with additional help and assistance. Teachers may take part in extracurricular events, after school programs, local initiatives such as a community garden, managing a breakfast club, offering counselling and tutoring, increasing communication with parents, etc. A teacher’s commitment to their profession necessarily involves commitment to students. Within the boundaries of prescribed legal obligations, teachers can become personally invested in seeing their students succeed, both inside and outside of school walls, beyond academic pursuits.

The measure of what educators label as student success relies on various factors. The Ontario Ministry of Education understands this concept in regards to students successfully completing secondary schooling and reaching post-secondary goals, whether these goals involve apprenticeships, college, university, or the workplace (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008). This success is also perceived through a student’s ongoing development as a lifelong learner and
growth as a whole person: intellectually, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually (Ayers, 2010; Feuerverger, 2007; Miller, 1998; Samuel and Suh, 2012). Academic achievement and student outcomes take shape on account of a combination of many factors, from socio-economic conditions to past histories, and material resources to available funding in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006). One factor that is sometimes overlooked yet very important when evaluating criteria that determine student success is the impact of the student-teacher relationship on learning and pedagogy (Davis and Dupper, 2004).

This relationship is approached differently across cultures and in consequence may affect student learning in diverse ways. Perceptions of teacher roles and responsibilities towards students vary from one classroom to another. To witness student success, teachers adopt roles that go beyond instruction, including guidance that can take the shape of mentorship (Ayers, 2010; hooks, 2003). The concept of mentoring students involves getting to know them better and becoming personally closer. But what is perceived “too close”? Cross-cultural studies of these perceptions reveal constructive insight and pedagogical strategies relevant to all educators looking for guidance on how to best support students in their academic pursuits and personal growth (Fowler et al., 2002; hooks, 2003; LeTendre, 1996). In North American contexts, the teacher is expected to be with students from the official start to the official end of the school day. They may engage in extra-curricular activities and see each other outside of class, during yard duty, detention, school-related projects, or other endeavours. Particularly at the high school level, teachers are careful not to become friends with students—first and foremost they deliver curriculum content—yet encouraged to find an emotional understanding with their students to better the school experience (Hargreaves, 2000). Balancing the professional and emotional
aspects of the job is a challenge teachers face daily (Hargreaves, 2000; Paris, 2008). How might these approaches compare to other frameworks?

The multitude of strategies outside the realm of accepted practice in Ontario is a rich place to examine the notion of this instrumental relationship. During my time working as a high school English teacher in Shizuoka, Japan from 2011 to 2014, I discovered an educational system unlike the one I was exposed to growing up in Toronto, Canada. I examined both educational systems by breaking down curriculums and engaged in enriching conversations and reflective practice with my colleagues in Japan. Taking the Canadian approach and comparing it to other, reputable and successful, foreign educational frameworks can reveal valuable insight on strengths and weaknesses of both systems.

1.1 Research problem

To develop a deeper understanding of the factors and criteria that influence student outcomes and success, the relationship that exists between school personnel and the student needs to be further explored (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh, Horner, Colditz, and Wallace, 2013). In an effort to increase graduation and lower drop out rates, promote a good outcome for all students, and address the various risk factors and socio-economic differences that affect student achievement (Canadian Council on Learning 2008), educators would benefit from a better understanding of what constitutes a supportive student-teacher relationship. Studies show that when teachers are more supportive and mentoring towards student needs, and attentive to the classroom climate and dynamics, they help students focus on their academic trajectories and positively influence their personal growth (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh et al., 2013; Paris 2008; Rich and Schachter, 2012).
A teacher’s commitment to their students can sometimes too easily entail a romanticized view of this dedication (Hargreaves, 2000; McHugh et al., 2013). Each teacher is unique in her/his practice and approach to emotions in the classroom. The presumption surrounding the teaching profession that educators are expected to maintain a particular emotional distance from students (Hargreaves, 2000), illustrates the challenges involved in balancing the emotional and professional boundaries of the job (Paris, 2008). Hargreaves’ study of teachers’ perceptions of interactions with students in Toronto public high schools, reveals difficulties secondary schoolteachers experience in regards to relationship building with students (2000). Some schoolteachers feel their students do not know them in any deep sense—beyond their role of delivering curriculum content—and feel treated as a stereotype, misunderstood, and overall unacknowledged (Hargreaves, 2000). Some also express the sentiment that “emotions might interfere with students’ learning” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 821). For instance, the structural, bureaucratic organization of high school life makes it a challenge for teachers to effectively develop emotional bonds with large numbers of students. Teaching is an emotional profession but the emotions involved in a student-teacher relationship need to be addressed critically rather than sentimentally (Hargreaves, 2000). Developing a solid base of emotional understanding between the student and teacher—by using effective programming, being consistent in classroom management, providing additional support, and creating a nurturing learning environment, is beneficial to fostering a meaningful rapport on which successful teaching can be built (Hargreaves, 2000).

1.2 Research purpose

Many educators perceive the student-teacher relationship as an integral part of pedagogy, having a significant impact on learning skills and individual student growth (Ayers 2010; hooks
Educational specialists have elaborated on the idea that education is culturally influenced (Ayers, 2010; Feuerverger, 2007; Fowler, Tweed, and Lehman, 2002; hooks, 2003; Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011; LeTendre, 1996; Ovando, 2003; Quist, 2001). Educational establishments—their organization, methods, structure, personnel, programs—vary across the world illustrating the lack of a universal approach to curriculum and learning. Beyond the familiarity of the Ontario classroom exists a wide array of celebrated pedagogical strategies. The purpose of my research study is to conduct a cross-cultural exploration of the student-teacher relationship in two vastly different yet well-renowned educational frameworks found in Canadian and Japanese schools (Education and Skill, 2015). The aim of this work is to highlight strengths and weaknesses within the diverse approaches. My observations in Ontario, Canada and Shizuoka, Japan taught me the significance of broadening our vision of teaching and considering alternative strategies: looking abroad can help identify gaps in the support system, and point to pertinent issues regarding the type of guidance, such as mentorship, that teachers provide students. To understand what makes a relationship that is both beneficial and constructive to the student, additional research surrounding teachers’ views and applied practice of their involvement in students’ lives is needed.

The goal of my research is to study the student-teacher relationship in Canadian and Japanese classrooms to find out how teachers navigate this relationship in two different cultural contexts. A supportive student-teacher relationship is one where the teacher adopts caring roles such as being a mentor to students (Ayers, 2010; Davis and Dupper, 2004; hooks, 2003). My interests lie in examining and comparing teachers’ perceptions of their responsibilities towards individual students’ success on an academic, social, and emotional plane. The purpose of this research is to develop a greater understanding of practices that best support students both inside
and outside the classroom, in particular of the figure of teacher as mentor, and foster a lifelong love of learning. I draw on my experiences in Canada and Japan to understand whether adopting additional supportive roles is perceived as part of an educator’s work, or whether it emerges from personal willingness.

1.3 Research question

The primary question guiding my research study is: How does a sample of teachers working in Canadian and Japanese classrooms perceive teachers’ responsibilities for fostering meaningful relationships with students both inside and outside of the classroom, and how do these teachers realize these responsibilities in practice? How do these educators develop a mentoring relationship with students, that best supports them in achieving their goals both inside and outside the classroom (post-secondary, academic, personal, career-related, etc.)?

1.3.1 Subsidiary questions

The following sub-questions will help guide my central research question:

- What are these teachers’ perspectives on the extent to which teachers should involve themselves in students’ lives beyond school?
- How do these teachers foster relationship building with their students outside of the classroom learning environment? What are their perceptions of the additional roles they adopt in the student-teacher relationship?
- How do these teachers perceive the role of teacher as mentor?
- How do these teachers interpret the notion of mentorship in a school environment?
- What indicators of student success and appreciation for lifelong learning do these teachers observe?
• What challenges do these teachers confront when building meaningful relationships with students that extend beyond the walls of the classroom? What factors and resources support them?

• What impact do structural factors have on student-teacher relationship building?

1.4 Reflexive positioning statement

As someone who has strongly benefited from positive relationships with teachers over the course of my elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, I am interested in examining and determining which aspects of the student-teacher relationship contribute to student success in and out of school. I want to stress the importance of this relationship and the significant role it can play in creating opportunities for students to build confidence, develop a healthy sense of identity, and experience success. As a beginning teacher it is important to me that I pay attention to the relationships I develop with students and the ways in which it can affect their experience of schooling, impact their motivation to continue their studies, and foster a lifelong love of learning. I hope that my research will offer insightful strategies on supporting healthy student growth in and out of school.

Working as an English language teacher in a high school in Shizuoka, Japan I experienced first-hand the benefits of promoting positive relationships with my students. I worked with students during and outside of school hours to ensure they could reach their academic and extra-curricular goals, and encouraged their pursuit of personal interests following graduation. The student-teacher relationship is approached from diverse perspectives in Canada and Japan. I benefit from my experiences in these two cultural contexts in examining the similarities and differences between their approaches to student-teacher dynamics. Engaging in an international dialogue will hopefully uncover revealing findings for all educators. I have
experienced the advantages of positive student-teacher relationships from the positions of both the student and the teacher; I would like to learn more about the dynamics that strengthen the emotional understanding between the two.

1.5 Preview of the whole

To respond to my research questions I conducted a qualitative research study using purposeful sampling to interview four high school teachers, in Ontario, Canada and Shizuoka, Japan. I asked questions regarding their perceptions of relationship-building with students, their role as mentors and the responsibilities they have towards their students, inside and outside of the classroom, in supporting student success and fostering lifelong learning. High school students, in particular, are at a critical stage of their identity development, just beginning to explore social roles, searching for meaningful counselling and support. The teachers have been selected from high schools set in relatively similar suburban areas, neighbouring a large city, to establish comparable settings in demographics and environment. In chapter 2, I review the areas of literature relevant to the concepts and themes regarding the student-teacher relationship, benefits and challenges teachers face within this paradigm, and perceptions of the additional roles they adopt, including that of mentor. In chapter 3, I address my research methodology, comprising interviews and data collection procedures. In chapter 4, I report on my research findings, and in chapter 5, I elaborate on these results and discuss their significance in relation to the existing literature and implications for my own education as a beginning teacher and for the broader educational community.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of the student-teacher relationship, mentorship in the classroom, cross-cultural approaches to pedagogy, and fostering lifelong learning in students. More specifically, I review themes related to teachers’ perceptions of their role as mentor to the whole student in and beyond the classroom, the challenges they face in supporting students, and how they approach their position to best support students in academic success and personal growth. I open an international dialogue on the student-teacher relationship, focusing closely on in education, engaging in a cross-cultural review of approaches to teaching and learning in Canada and Japan. I start by reviewing the literature in the area concerning teaching duties that go beyond curriculum documents, and consider the possible implications of an overly compassionate teacher. Next, I look at the research on cross-cultural similarities and differences in secondary school teachers’ responsibilities regarding their role as a mentor, and the perceived and potential challenges they face. Finally, I review research on the figure of teacher-mentor in relation to the education of the whole student.

2.1 More than an instructor

2.1.1 Teaching is personal

Thanks to the development of online communication systems, today we have access to learning about almost anything, in the fraction of a second. So why do we still have schools? And teachers? And teacher education programs that help prepare for the unpredictable dynamics of the classroom? These institutions exist because teachers are more than instructors that deliver content. Indeed they are public servants who complete their civic duties in educating future generations, yet they also serve as counsellors, mentors, tutors, advisors, and coaches (Ayers,
The position demands they provide the type of guidance that cannot be found in a curriculum document.

Teaching and learning is highly personal as it involves regular interaction between two persons: instructor and pupil. Reports from diverse educators shed light on this aspect of the profession (Ayers, 2010; hooks, 2003; Feuerverger, 2007; Paris, 2008). Due to the nature of this human interactive process, a meaningful connection between student and teacher can develop. Commitment to teaching involves caring about student outcomes and success inside the classroom and beyond, in academic goals and personal growth—success defined as “the degree to which we open the space for students to learn, getting at the root meaning of the word to educate: to draw out” (hooks, 2003, p. 130). The mutual pursuit of knowledge on behalf of instructor and pupil creates an ideal environment for learning (hooks, 2003). When teachers are lifelong learners themselves, they have the ability to foster the same in their students and effectively demonstrate how education never has a finish line.

2.1.2 Responsibilities that go beyond the curriculum

A teacher adopts many work-related responsibilities and assignments that take place on and off school grounds. They run extra-curricular activities, after school programs, manage clubs, and provide additional help during lunch hours. They might even participate in overnight trips with students, providing assistance where needed. Some of these responsibilities are mandatory and part of the job, but as time spent in a classroom is limited, teachers may choose to take on additional roles outside this space to get to know and understand their students better. They fill non-instructional roles and deal with situations that do not share a direct relation with curriculum content (Ayers, 2010; Mishlove, 2004). A teacher’s responsibilities are personalized to the unique dynamics of a classroom and the students in it (Ayers, 2010). bell hooks purports
that “teachers who do the best work are always willing to serve the needs of their students” (hooks, 2003, p. 83). Considering the wealth of diversity among learners that walk through a teacher’s classroom door, teachers have the responsibility to go where needed and assist students with far more than schoolwork.

Some responsibilities, ethical and legal, that the teaching profession entails are outlined in black and white in ministry documents. Other responsibilities, social and emotional, are subject to personal opinion and fall into a grey area. Studies highlight the importance of the social and emotional elements of teaching, developing meaningful connections and interpersonal relationships with students, in turn benefiting their academic and personal growth (Davis and Dupper, 2004; Jackson-Crossland, 2000; McHugh et al., 2013; Paris, 2008). Teachers’ perceptions of their work responsibilities shape the learning environment students walk into every day (Jackson-Crossland, 2000; Ovando, 2003). Student anxiety or apprehension to learning can persist as a result of negativity brought into the classroom (McHugh et al., 2013). An atmosphere built on competition, hard and fast rules, and unwavering discipline, is not conducive to fostering a positive student-teacher relationship (McNulty and Roseboro, 2009). Being the leader at the front of the class puts teachers in an incredible position of power over students (Paris, 2008). Embracing this precarious role of authority demands reflective practice, appropriate guidance, and constructive support.

Research indicates that before students can get to their learning goals, teachers have the responsibility to ensure students feel safe and develop the proper social skills to form trusting relationships with others in their school community (Davis and Dupper, 2004). Relationships between student and teacher can be nurturing but they can also be detrimental (Feuerverger 2007; hooks, 2003; Paris 2008). Students may not relate to staff or feel like they fit into the
school setting (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh et al., 2013; Ovando, 2003). The everyday choices educators make, and the ways in which they assume responsibilities, shapes the school climate. Schools and classrooms are referred to as communities, spaces where educators, parents, students, caretakers, administrative staff, lunch supervisors, and a number of others, ideally work together to create a positive space for learning and healthy growth. This act of community building has school personnel assuming responsibilities outside ministry guidelines. To maximize educative experiences, students have to feel welcomed and trusted by the institution they attend everyday (Davis and Dupper, 2004).

2.2 Overly compassionate

2.2.1 Balancing the professional and the emotional

The personal nature of interaction between student and teacher points to reasons why teaching is an emotional profession (Hargreaves, 2000; Paris, 2008). Schoolteachers often have difficulty gauging between what is considered a sufficient amount of care and what is deemed too much (Paris, 2008). Teachers have a responsibility to promote an inclusive space, however not meaning that everyone’s life becomes an open-book in the classroom. Being overly compassionate is viewed as bad as having no compassion at all (Paris, 2008). An excessive display of concern towards a particular student, for example a child who comes from a low-income household, can further marginalize them and may negatively affect performance at school (Ovando, 2003; Paris, 2008). When teachers involve themselves too deeply in their students’ lives, such as in financial issues, it can be damaging to the student to the point of making them feel inferior in the classroom. Paris explains in greater detail: “With all the best of intentions, teachers can unwittingly be doing more harm than good when we offer to solve the students' problems for them […]” (2008, p. 88). Teaching, learning and mentoring are
interrelated emotional practices (Hargreaves, 2000) yet an outpouring of emotion can make students lose trust in their teacher (Paris, 2008). If a troubled student needs help, the teacher is not responsible to fix the student’s life, but to provide opportunities and information that will help them choose the course of action that may improve their situation (Paris, 2008). At the other extreme, ignoring signs of problems or conflict also hinders a student’s opportunity to learn.

When teachers fail to reach out, they are unable to effectively engage the learner, since they do not take the time to effectively understand the learner (McHugh et al., 2013). Fair is not treating everyone the same, fair is going where the teacher is needed. McHugh et al.’s study reveals the importance adolescents attribute to teachers’ efforts in trying to understand them, caring about more than their academics (2013). Participants expressed that when the teacher got to know them, they felt as though the teacher cared more about their lives (McHugh et al., 2013).

Similarly, being overly authoritarian comes across as ineffective as having no authority in the classroom (Paris, 2008). Teachers who implement unbendable rules and regulations fail to cater to individual student needs: such an environment prioritizes structural order and discipline, over positive learning and growth (McNulty and Roseboro, 2009). And when there is no authority, the teacher fails to appear as a professionally qualified educator, one prepared to lead the class (Paris, 2008). Paris explains that our students are “[…] not our friends or peers with whom we can share intimate details of our personal lives.” (2008, p. 39). Close student-teacher relationships are not to be confused with friendships (McHugh et al., 2013). Neither extreme is conducive to learning—neither can help the student succeed academically or personally.

Handling emotions in and outside of the classroom is a careful balancing act.
2.2.2 The ethic of care

For students to reach beyond academic achievements and attain personal goals, research shows they need to feel cared for and learn to care for others (Noddings, 1995). A healthy sense of identity may develop more positively in students when the school represents a caring and nurturing environment (Rich and Schachter, 2012). Noddings argues that in order to understand what the cared-for (in this case the student) is going through, the carer (in this case the teacher) needs to put aside his/her concerns and devote time, energy, and attention to listen attentively (2012). Teachers should encourage students to think about others and to be reflective of what they themselves are feeling (Noddings, 2012). The notion of nurturing students’ growth, providing resourceful guidance, and creating pathways to facilitate their success, is ultimately based on the concept of care. When students are cared for and learn about caring, it can help them academically as a motivation to study, and humanly in developing empathy for others (Noddings, 1995). These views emphasize caring as fundamental to teaching and an essential element of a successful student-teacher relationship.

Nonetheless, a teacher’s strong commitment to their students can lead to a romanticized view of the relationship between instructor and pupil (Hargreaves, 2000; McHugh et al., 2013). McHugh et al. argue the importance of distinguishing between aesthetic care—affectionate and sentimental words without any action—and authentic care—genuine concern and actions considerate of the student’s abilities and skills—when teachers support students (2013). Sincere dedication is a significant factor in promoting growth, however teachers need to engage in ongoing reflection of the ways in which they show care and affection. Empty, meaningless praise does not fall under the criteria of a supportive, student-teacher relationship. Teachers are held accountable for what they do (Samuel and Suh, 2012) and good mentorship involves care that is
meaningful and constructive. Although teachers may not always see themselves as mentors to their students, they often come to be identified as such.

On the other side of the issue—opposite to a sentimental, romanticized take on the student-teacher relationship—is the teacher who exudes so much dedication and compassion towards students that it leads to burnout (hooks, 2003; Mishlove, 2004). As teachers deal with a growing number of expectations at school—supervising extra-curriculars, coaching, planning, supervising—may become increasingly preoccupied with their non-instructional roles (Mishlove, 2004). They may find themselves struggling to devote the same amount of care to each of their students, in and out of the classroom. At the cost of trying to better understand their pupils, they experience stress and anxiety (hooks, 2003; Mishlove, 2004). They pay less attention to their instructional duties, perhaps neglecting classroom priorities, because of too many roles they may need to assume, from nutritionist to baby-sitter, nurse to psychologist (Ayers, 2010; Mishlove, 2004). When teachers experience burnout, they lose the ability to see the classroom as a constructive setting for learning (hooks, 2003).

2.3 Mentoring across cultures

2.3.1 Confucian and Socratic educational frameworks

Education and learning is culturally influenced (Fowler et al., 2002; LeTendre, 1996) and thus represents a unique experience for every child. The relationship that develops between instructor and pupil is therefore equally affected by culture and environment—rural vs. urban communities, less-populated vs. densely-populated areas, presence of homogenous vs. heterogeneous groups, etc. are all factors that can influence student-teacher dynamics. Educators and students alike are not always aware of particular cultural influences that might affect their actions at school. Students carry all of their previous experiences with them into the classroom
(Dewey, 1998)—contributing to their performance and behaviour. The role of a teacher, as a leader and mentor to future generations, is perceived uniquely across cultures. An educational framework with unanimous, universal approval does not exist.

Two particularly recognized models for learning are the Confucian and Socratic frameworks of education. The former is more traditionally associated with education in the East, referring to culturally East Asian individuals of any ethnic group, and the latter is associated with the West, referring to culturally Western English-speaking individuals (e.g. American, Australian, Canadian) of any ethnic group (Fowler et al., 2002; Fukuzawa, 1996; LeTendre, 1996). Examining the core concepts and underlying values of these educational frameworks may lend to a deeper understanding of the importance of the student-teacher relationship in these different cultural settings.

2.3.2 Canada and Japan

Although the Confucian and Socratic approaches are highly broad generalizations of two educational frameworks, they do highlight some of the ways in which teaching is perceived differently in classroom settings around the world (Fowler et al., 2002). Examining the core concepts at the centre of these frameworks highlights some of the general distinctions between teaching practices in Canada and Japan, including perceptions regarding the cultural importance of a teacher’s role in the classroom and in a student’s life. The understanding of learning processes represented in these contexts elucidates different approaches to teacher-mentoring practices.

The Confucian approach involves a more effort-focused conception of learning, where the search for answers and truth is mainly found outside the self, particularly from others, “exemplars”, who possess greater knowledge on the subject matter (Fowler et al., 2002, p. 92).
The Socratic approach is individualistic in comparison, where the search for answers and truth is mainly lead by questioning and evaluating from within the self (Fowler et al., 2002). The Confucian approach draws similarities with the notion that in Japanese classrooms, effort and dedication are emphasized over ability (LeTendre, 1996). The social context in which the learning takes place is inseparable from the learning itself and the idea of being excessively independent is negatively perceived. Senior students and teachers mentor junior students, and all together they manage the entire school. Teachers are essentially involved in all aspects of the student’s life. Their roles and responsibilities extend beyond the traditional view of teachers delivering curriculum content—they’re managing role in the school demonstrates how guidance is realized and represents an integral part of school life. From counselling students, to managing school clubs, accounting duties, and cleaning the swimming pool, teachers have an obligation to set up an exemplary model for students to follow. The curriculum includes diverse activities labelled “non-academic”—music, art, sports, field trips, clubs, ceremonies, homeroom time, etc.—with the goal of enhancing the full development of the whole person (Fukuzawa, 1996).

On the other hand, the Socratic approach draws similarities with practices familiar to experiences in Ontario schools; the recent push for inquiry-based learning and the use of critical thinking skills in Ontario classrooms is evidence to that (Ministry of Education, 2010). In inquiry-based learning, students formulate questions and try answering these through investigation to produce new knowledge (Branch, 2003). Teachers guide students to find the right answers, developing their use of critical thinking and creativity skills (OECD, 2012). To become a more independent learner is positively encouraged. Ontario teachers are also held accountable for their students’ learning and have the obligation to deliver curriculum content, but ultimately their involvement in students’ lives is not as integrated as in the Japanese context.
Japanese high school students are generally taught by the same set of teachers throughout their high school education. Teachers specialize in one subject—English, Japanese, math, history, science, etc.—and teach only that subject. Ontario high school students could possibly be faced with eight different teachers every year, over the course of four years. Japanese high school students also spend more days in a week and more weeks in a year at school than do Ontario high school students. By nature of the organization of Japan’s educational system, students and teachers spend more time together (Fukuzawa, 1996; LeTendre, 1996).

The classroom is an incredibly dynamic workspace because teachers are required to do so much in a very limited amount of time (hooks, 2003). Unsurprisingly teachers may want to develop a relationship with their students beyond the fulfillment of curriculum expectations. This raises questions regarding cultural perspectives on a teacher’s approach to opportunities that arise to mentor students in and out of the classroom. A culture that places great importance on academic success could similarly place a high level of importance on the teacher’s role in a student’s life (Fowler et al., 2002). Also, cultural values surrounding respect, such as looking up to our elders could have an impact on this dynamic role. Further research is required to understand how teachers accept additional roles involved in building meaningful relationships with students, such as the role of mentor, as a mandatory or optional requirement of their job.

2.4 Mentor to the whole student

2.4.1 What is the whole student?

The idea of educating the whole student lies in seeing the child as a whole person, acknowledging all of the experiences they carry with them into the classroom and recognizing these as an integral part of their success at school—their talents, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, everything that they can and cannot do (Ayers, 2010; Feuerverger, 2007). Holistic education
attempts to broaden our vision of education and human development because it addresses more than the student’s academic abilities and achievements (Miller, 1998). By trying to understand the full measure of a student—intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally—the teacher can engage the whole child in the learning process. Dewey argued that experience is not isolated, so neither is education (Dewey, 1998). What children see, hear, and touch in their everyday lives affects how they relate to and process class content (Dewey, 1998). The holistic approach perceives an effective educator as one who knows where the student is in their developmental stage, and considers the child’s view of the world in assessment and evaluation (Miller, 1998; Samuel and Suh, 2012).

2.4.2 Perceived challenges

Engaging the whole child in the learning process involves mentoring, counselling and showing interest in more areas than the student’s grades. It requires a shift from seeing students in terms of what they cannot do, and knowing more of what they can do—a model based on competencies as opposed to incompetencies (Ayers, 2010). A show of compassion and care is implied, often demanding more than limited, class-time instruction. One of the largest advocates behind the philosophy of engaging the whole student in education is the Waldorf School, a private educational institution. The Waldorf philosophy of education purports that the human being is central to the entire learning experience (Waldorf Canada). It argues for a whole systems approach to human capabilities, built on a model of experiential learning with all lessons containing recreational aspects (Waldorf Canada). This approach to education raises concerns regarding teachers working in public boards of education, with larger class sizes and a growing number of students, and the feasibility of implementing this kind of philosophy of learning into
pedagogy. In these settings, where interaction between instructor and pupil is often shared and limited, teachers potentially face great challenges in getting to know their learners individually.

However, in Toronto, an option to private holistic education is the Toronto District School Board’s Equinox Holistic Alternative School. Established in 2006, the institution is open to anyone residing in the city area (Equinox, 2015). The philosophy of holistic education is integrated into the school curriculum. They claim their “approach addresses the whole child and promotes the development of healthy, responsible, inquisitive, creative human beings” while striking a balance between student-led and teacher-led activities (Equinox, 2015). Similar to the Waldorf School, their focus is centered on an arts-integrated experiential learning model (Equinox, 2015). Nonetheless acceptance is limited, based on a lottery system, and not all Toronto students who want to attend can be admitted. A conception of learning grounded in firsthand experimentation and hands-on practice raises a number of challenges. It requires more open space and necessitates additional funding. It also creates a demand for more specialized teachers, who have completed additional training in integrating experiential pedagogy into all learning. The vision of offering limitless choices and opening the door to all learners idealistically sounds like a brilliant approach to education, yet in reality may be difficult to implement across all boards of education (Miller and Drake, 1997).

Considering the duties of a teacher on any given day—yard duty, in-class instruction, extra-curriculars—effectively educating the whole child is potentially an unattainable goal. Advantages comprise a better understanding of the students and feeling more accepted as their leader, and as for the disadvantages teachers can experience burnout and high levels of stress (Mishlove, 2004). Particularly for middle and secondary school teachers who teach on rotary, they face limitations in making meaningful connections with their students. In Ontario secondary
schools, teachers may not necessarily have the same students the following year—the classes they teach are primarily assigned by subject, not grade. In Japan however, teachers tend to stay with the same grade, teaching them the same subject, until graduation (LeTendre, 1996). Often, their homeroom teacher also does not change. Challenges teachers face in mentoring might lie in a combination of the structural organization of a school, and their personal desire to mentor. Mentoring is a fundamental component in the structure of the Japanese educational system (LeTendre, 1996), but an assumed responsibility in Ontario schools. The element of continuity is an important factor when it comes to building positive, supportive relationships with students. The school climate and structure will not always be favourable for such relationships to develop (Paris, 2008).

2.4.3 Benefits of adopting this role

In spite of the challenges related to taking on a mentoring role in the classroom, it brings many benefits (Ayers, 2010; Davis and Dupper, 2004; hooks, 2003; Feuerverger, 2007; McHugh et al., 2013; Miller, 1998; Paris, 2008). Devoting time and interest to both the intellectual and personal growth of a student, is worthwhile for both the student and the teacher (Miller, 1998). The student feels recognized and cared for, and the teacher gains better awareness of student needs, helping increase their productivity. The teacher may also simply enjoy getting to know students better. Mentoring students gives the learning process a greater sense of wholeness (Paris, 2008).

Research studies show that a positive or negative student-teacher relationship is one of the underlying factors involved in high school dropout rates (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh et al., 2013). Students’ relationships with teachers do influence their choice of dropping out or staying in school. Teachers can underestimate the powerful impact their actions have on students
in shaping their schooling experience (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh et al., 2013). Minority students and English language learners in the classroom can also benefit from mentoring (Ovando, 2003). Some students experience difficulty learning in the classroom setting because of emotional scars and traumatic pasts (Ovando, 2003). An English language learner is not only a student who struggles to communicate in English, but a whole person overcoming great challenges to acquire new language skills. Mentoring can establish a greater sense of trust between instructor and pupil. The idea of receiving “special” academic help serves to make students feel increasingly marginalized, decreasing their interest in school (Ovando, 2003). Teachers can work closely with pupils to understand more deeply rooted issues affecting their performance in and out of school. Teachers who open their doors to offer guidance can help shape career paths, assist with job and/or university applications, and become part of life-changing decisions.

2.4.4 A school-based program

School mentorship programs are considered one way of effectively reaching out to disengaged students (Cantu, 2013). Davies defines a good mentor as someone who selflessly provides “support, knowledge and encouragement” and a strong mentor will possess the “skills, personality and experience to meet these key factors” (2005, p. 8). One study that examines the implementation of school-based mentorship programs in North American middle schools—the goal of which are to assist students at a critical stage of transitioning into high school life, beginning to explore identity development—documents the outcomes of a mentorship program (Cantu, 2013). In these programs, an adult is present on-site as mentor to selected students (Cantu, 2013). While organization and procedures involved in the programs vary to a certain extent, the overall goal tends to be the same: “to successfully provide supports that build capacity
within students so they might effectively manage these difficult years and beyond” (2013, p. 93).

The study produced mixed results. Despite the fact that the majority of research on mentoring reports its positive impact on academics and attendance, this study showed little of that (Cantu, 2013). An increase in some areas of academics was evident, yet overall not much change was recorded. Although a number of educational specialists report on the benefits of mentoring (Ayers, 2010; Davis and Dupper, 2004; hooks, 2003; Feuerverger, 2007; McHugh et al., 2013; Miller, 1998; Paris, 2008), this study highlights the fact that some student issues simply go beyond what a professional can do for them within the school environment. A teacher’s course of action can be entirely founded on good intentions. However, all mentorship programs, like the ones examined in this study, need to be continuously revised and evaluated for effectiveness (Davies, 2005; Cantu, 2013). Teachers face limitations in their determination to help; yet in order to create a solid foundation for relationship-building with students, sensitivity to research-based strategies needs to be reflected in selected methods.

2.5 The next step

In this literature review I looked at research on mentorship in the classroom, teacher responsibilities that go beyond the curriculum, as well as cultural influences on teaching and learning. I also examined the potential challenges and benefits surrounding the idea of educating the whole student. This review elucidates the extent that attention has been paid to both the advantages and disadvantages of a teacher being a mentor for their students, and the potential for cross-cultural variations in an educator’s perception of this role. It raises questions regarding whether schoolteachers see mentoring as part of their job—an obligation, inseparable from their contract duties—or as a personal choice—taken up on their own time, from personal willingness. It also raises questions about the factors that affect positive and/or negative outcomes of adopting
additional roles outside the confines of prescribed legal responsibilities. This points to the need for further research in the areas of teachers’ perceptions of taking on additional, meaningful, roles within the student-teacher relationship, to understand which ones they generally associate with, what motivates them to adopt these, and which ones they believe best support students in academic and personal success. Next, in chapter 3, I address my research methodology, comprising interviews and data collection procedures.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the research methodology I used in my study. In the first section I review general research approach and procedures, including data collection instruments, then elaborate more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment. I continue by explaining data analysis procedures and review ethical considerations pertinent to my study. In turn, I identify some of the methodological limitations while also addressing significant strengths of the methodology. Finally I conclude the chapter with a brief synopsis of key methodological decisions and my rationale for this approach given my research purpose and questions, and the particular nature of my study.

3.1 Research approach and procedures

This research study used a qualitative approach involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. Considering the personal nature of and questions guiding my study, I decided that a qualitative approach was best suited to collect data. This process involved reviewing relevant literature and existing research on the topic, and using this foundation of knowledge to search for answers outside of what is already known. Carefully selected participants fulfilled the role of supplementing the literature by providing meaningful accounts that reflected on personal experience. Using this method, researchers can gather valuable information up close and personally, by talking directly with participants (Beitin, 2012; Creswell, 2013).

This method of inquiry caters specifically to the aims of effectively building rapport and putting informants at ease. My research goal is to gain a deeper understanding of student-teacher relationship dynamics in Canadian and Japanese contexts. I focus particularly on perceptions
surrounding teacher responsibilities towards students inside and outside of the classroom, including mentorship. Relationships are personal and represent an emotional topic in the very personal and emotional profession of teaching (Hargreaves, 2000; Paris, 2008). I was interested in the meaning my participants brought to the topic, to understand and report the multiple perspectives directly from experienced education professionals (Creswell, 2013). Also, essential to learning more about this topic was establishing a meaningful connection with participants (Beitin, 2012). Qualitative research allowed me to develop this connection through an interactive, face-to-face approach.

3.2 Instruments of data collection

The primary instrument of data collection used in my research study is the semi-structured interview. As previously mentioned, I was interested in the meaning that participants brought to the topic and semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to hear about those lived experiences (Boschma, Yonge, and Mychajlunow, 2003; Creswell, 2013). Generally speaking semi-structured interviews are used “to understand the reasons why people act in particular ways, by exploring participants' perceptions, experiences and attitudes” (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001, p. 219). My research explores how teachers feel about and perceive their relationships with students in and out of the classroom. Student-teacher relationships are uniquely personal, which can make it a sensitive and perhaps challenging topic of discussion for a number of educators. By designing my interview protocol with a semi-structured approach, my goal was to create a comfortable space where interviewees were encouraged to think about the questions carefully and identify their true feelings (Whiting, 2008).

My research study not only explores the multiple perspectives of teachers, it is also situated in two widely different cultural contexts of Canada and Japan. Research questions and
goals were the same for each set of participants, however interviews were sensitively tailored to avoid any cultural faux pas. The semi-structured format conveniently uses a flexible framework consisting of open-ended questions (Creswell, 2013). This allowed me, the researcher, to design and plan an interview that adhered to the main purpose and questions of the study, while also leaving enough room for participants to elaborate on relevant topics which are not explicitly stated in the protocol (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001; Whiting, 2008). The emphasis was on the interviewee, who was given the freedom to elaborate on points of interest he or she perceived most relevant to the study (Denscombe, 2003). Themes that developed throughout the interview could therefore be explored in greater detail (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). Considering the international component of my research, I observed significant differences in responses to interview questions from teachers in Canada in comparison with Japan, and vice versa. To ensure that the accounts provided tied into the key points of my study, I needed to be thoroughly informed on the topic in both cultural contexts (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). This helped me tackle unanticipated areas of discussion that arose during the interview (Denscombe, 2003).

3.3 Participants

In this section I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment. I also review the outlets I explored for teacher recruitment. Finally, I have included a section where I introduce each of the participants. Note that all names have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of participants in this study.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

In terms of participants, I searched for teachers who have had experience in adopting additional, supportive and/or mentoring roles towards their students, inside and outside of the
classroom. I was interested in finding teachers who believe that building meaningful rapport with students can help promote learning goals, academic achievements, and overall personal growth.

I interviewed four high school teachers: two in Ontario, Canada, and two in Shizuoka, Japan. My interest in interviewing high school teachers stemmed from the fact that they are working with students at a critical stage of their identity development, only beginning to explore social roles. Students go through many changes and may experience vulnerability in high school, thus I was curious to see how teachers approach relationship building with learners at this stage in their lives.

Another aim of mine was to interview teachers who work in high schools set in relatively similar suburban areas, neighbouring a large city. I looked at high schools in Etobicoke and Mississauga, western suburbs of Toronto, and Fujieda, a small suburban town to the west of Shizuoka city. I chose these to establish similarly comparable settings in demographics and environment. I searched for experienced educational professionals, with a minimum of 12 years working as a teacher. Becoming a supportive, mentor figure in a student’s life does not happen overnight. To increase the validity of my findings, my study highlights the work of experienced teachers.

Finally, I also looked for teachers who have had experience with extra-curricular activities that take place on and/or off school grounds, during and/or after school hours. This included sporting activities, music events, field trips, planning committees, and more. Since my research topic focuses on teachers’ perceptions of their interactions with students in and out of the classroom, I thought ahead of interviewing teachers who have specifically had these experiences with students.
3.3.2 Sampling procedures

To recruit teachers I used purposeful sampling procedures. In qualitative research the interest often lies in recruiting a small number of participants who strongly represent the phenomena being studied (Beitin, 2012). In this way “participants or informants are purposively selected to represent rich knowledge about the research questions” (Beitin, 2012, p. 248). To produce rich data collection, I wanted my participants to be well-informed and experienced on the subject of building student-teacher relationships and the idea of embracing a mentorship role. Sampling criteria should always be transparent and thoroughly considered when selecting contributing participants (Sampling Logic, 2007).

More specifically, I relied on convenient sampling to locate my participants. As the name of the method suggests, convenient sampling entails selecting participants who are conveniently able to participate in the study (Robinson, 2014). This can be due to multiple factors such as proximity, established connections, and/or familiarity with the research (Robinson, 2014; Sampling Logic, 2007). Convenient sampling is also beneficial in saving valuable time and effort in the recruitment process (Creswell, 2013). Being immersed in a community of teaching professionals, I relied on my existing network of contacts and made further connections through these means to find participants to suit my study. To find participants in Toronto I started by contacting old high school teachers of mine who I believed were involved in school life and student activities beyond the Ontario curriculum. To locate participants in Japan I contacted my former colleagues at the school where I worked as an English language teacher for three years—Fujieda Higashi High School—and asked them to share the criteria for the participants I was searching. These attempts at finding participants provided fruitful results.
3.3.3 Participant bios

Andy

Andy originates from Toronto, Ontario and has been working as a high school teacher in the GTA for 22 years. He teaches mostly French immersion subjects, including social studies. His interest in teaching at the senior level stems from an interest in sharing subject-related experiences and a love of communicating appreciation for certain areas at a deeper level than in primary classrooms.

Maya

Maya originates from Africa and has been working as a high school teacher in the GTA for 14 years. She has taught mostly math and science subjects in her teaching career. For about 10 years now she has worked as a high school guidance counsellor. She always felt she had more to offer secondary school students, in terms of knowledge and experience, which led her to teach at the senior level.

Kumiko

Kumiko originates from Fujieda, Japan and has been working as a high school teacher in the Shizuoka prefecture for 32 years. She is an English language teacher. She was drawn to teaching at the senior level out of a personal interest in foreign languages. She wanted to continue studying English and also had the desire to share that passion with students.

Ayane

Ayane originates from Shizuoka, Japan and has been working as a high school teacher in the Shizuoka prefecture for 32 years. She is also an English language teacher. Her knowledge of the English language and undergraduate studies in English literature propelled her to pursue these interests in a professional setting by choosing a career in teaching at the senior level.
3.4 Data analysis

Analysing data involves making sense of the data collected in relation to the research questions (Analyzing Qualitative Data, 2007). Broadly speaking, the procedure entailed organizing, reducing and describing the data—identifying and categorizing themes to interpret and make meaning out of participants’ accounts (Analyzing Qualitative Data, 2007; Lockyer, 2004). In my research study I began by transcribing each interview using audio recordings and notes. I then coded these transcripts individually; a procedure where the data was broken down into manageable segments, using the research questions as interpretive tools (Coding, 2007; Lockyer, 2004). These segments were identified as categories of data—groupings of related data—that were further deconstructed into common themes (Coding, 2007; Thematic Analysis, 2007). This process enabled me to see how the data contributed to greater, emerging themes (Thematic Analysis, 2007), synthesizing information where needed (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative coding allows for the data to be “identified, reordered, and considered in different ways” (Lockyer, 2004, p. 138).

As this process revealed answers to my research questions, it also uncovered biases and divergences in the data, and what is still unknown about the topic (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). It was important to identify what participants did not speak to as it highlights what teachers do not mention—deliberately avoiding or unintentionally forgetting—when it comes the student-teacher relationship and mentoring. This project revealed pertinent details beyond existing literature and research, highlighting the way teachers speak directly to the themes, and how these concepts are actualized and represented in their individualized, personal voices. The significance of this process lies in making meaning out of teachers’ unique accounts. The multiple levels of analysis involving coding, cross-examining themes, and merging together
ideas, generated a fascinating international discussion surrounding the value of mentorship and other existing factors in the student-teacher relationship.

3.5 Ethical review procedures

To ensure that I followed proper ethical review procedures throughout my research study, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity were guiding principles in all data collection activities (Boschma et al., 2003). In qualitative studies, researchers are “concerned with privacy, which means protecting the individual; with confidentiality, which refers to protecting data; and with anonymity, which refers to hiding any information that could identify the participants” (Boschma et al., 2003, p. 341). All participant information is regarded as private and will only be revealed with the individual’s consent (Israel, 2006). Information was voluntarily given in confidence to the researcher—without much direct benefit to the participants in question—therefore teachers needed to consent that information provided is used solely for the purpose of the research study, by myself, the researcher (Boschma et al., 2003; Israel, 2006), as well as my course instructor.

The consent letter I asked my participants to sign enforced this confidentiality agreement (see appendix A). This letter provided a summary of the study, outlined the interview procedure that lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, detailed the ethical implications, and specified participant expectations. It informed participants of their right to withdraw at any point during the study, even after they gave consent. I explained that identities would remain confidential: each participant being assigned a pseudonym and all identifying markers that reveal any connection to their school or students cautiously omitted. I stressed the fact that the focus of the research study is on experience, not the identity of the participant (Boschma et al., 2003). Considering the dangers of what may happen to data after its collection—whose hands it could
fall in, for what means, to what advantage, etc.—(Israel, 2006), I have stored all information on my password protected laptop and will have the files destroyed after five years.

There are no known risks or benefits to the participants for having taken part in the research study. However, due to the previously mentioned personal nature of the student-teacher relationship, it can be perceived as a sensitive topic. Considering this factor, some of my research questions provoked an emotional reaction in participants (see Appendix B). I reassured them throughout the study that they were free to withdraw entirely from the project at any moment, and could choose not to answer any question during the interview (Boschma et al., 2003). Following the interview, I shared a copy of the transcript with participants if they so desired, allowing them to make any changes deemed necessary, including the retraction of statements.

3.6 Methodological limitations and strengths

This project came with a number of limitations and strengths. No research study is ever void of weakness (Beitin, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001). Due to the limited scope and restricted time frame of the Master of Teaching Research Project, it was only possible to interview a small number of participants—in my research study a total of four teachers. Theorists cannot agree on an optimal sample size, due to an endless range of possible projects and choice of study topics (Beitin, 2012; Creswell, 2013). However some argue that in purposeful sampling, an ideal sample size cannot be measured, as the sample size depends on the nature of the study, the research topic, and questions guiding the project (Beitin, 2012; Sampling Logic, 2007). In addition, my study does not include site observations or fieldwork, having spent no time doing research in an actual classroom, nor listening to students’ perspectives. This small study lacks depth and credibility to generalize any findings and make statements on behalf of all teachers’ experiences (Beitin, 2012).
Nonetheless, the outcome of this project informs the topic and could lead to further research in the same area. Findings do not reveal how teachers can master the ability of being both excellent instructors and mentors inside and outside of the classroom. However conclusions pulled from data collection—in two incredibly different cultural contexts—enrich our knowledge of navigating the student-teacher relationship. Having chosen to talk directly to teachers highlights their direct input in the research study. The semi-structured interview format ensured their voices were represented in the findings (Beitin, 2012; Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001), as opposed to data collected from a multiple-choice questionnaire or relying on previous research. Teachers were given the opportunity to reflect on their own practice, delve into the reasoning behind some of their pedagogical decisions and better understand how they act or can act as mentors to their students. This project serves to validate participants’ experiences, stressing their contribution to the research and knowledge about the study topic (Beitin, 2012; Boschma et al., 2003).

3.7 Conclusion: brief overview and preview of what is next

The student-teacher relationship is uniquely individual to every learner and educator, varying widely according to social context and personal circumstance. The relationship is an integral and inseparable part of the learning experience as students receive guidance and assistance from teachers that go beyond mere instruction. Teaching is personal because it involves prolonged and close interaction between people (Paris, 2008). This qualitative study takes a closer look at this personal aspect of the profession, exploring how teachers navigate student-teacher interactions in Ontario, Canada and Shizuoka, Japan. I selected a semi-structured interview format as the open-ended questions allowed my participants to elaborate freely and comfortably on topics that arose throughout the process. Different cultural contexts generated
different responses and my questions needed to accommodate to this fact. The focus of the study is on experience (Boschma et al., 2003) and my methodological decisions stress the significance of my participants’ accounts in the data collection procedure. I searched for skilled professionals, with several years of working experience, who are well-informed and knowledgeable on the subject of building meaningful relationships with students. Being aware that this is a sensitive topic to some, I took it upon myself to remind participants of their right to withdraw from the project at any time. As a result of time constraints and limitations on the scope of the project, my sample size is too small to produce any general findings (Beitin, 2012). However, my cross-cultural study and analysis revealed valuable insight on pedagogical strategies and tools relevant to all teachers searching to continually improve their practice and better their students’ lives. Next, I report these research findings in chapter 4.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the findings from interviews conducted with four experienced senior high school teachers. The interviewees are referred to by the pseudonyms Andy and Maya, from Ontario, Canada, and Kumiko and Ayane, from Shizuoka, Japan. The goal of my cross-cultural research study is to examine the student-teacher relationship in two widely different contexts: Canadian and Japanese educational frameworks. A wide range of approaches towards fostering this instrumental relationship exist outside the realm of established Ontario pedagogical practices. These alternative approaches can further inform educational professionals of factors that contribute to student success. My experience teaching in Shizuoka, Japan exposed me to an educational system unlike any I had experienced before. I was drawn to comparing both systems, with the aim of uncovering methods that could potentially improve practices and maximize benefits for the learner.

I set out to understand how a sample of teachers working in Canadian and Japanese classrooms perceive their responsibilities towards fostering meaningful relationships with students both inside and outside of the classroom, and how they realize these responsibilities in practice. I also looked into how these educators develop a mentoring relationship with students, that best supports them in achieving their goals both inside and outside the classroom (post-secondary, academic, personal, career-related, etc.). A number of themes apparent in each of the four participants’ accounts emerged from the collected data. These themes reflect patterns in the answers provided. These include participants’ love of lifelong learning, a deep regard for the ethic of care, the understanding of being more than an instructor in the classroom, and diverse perceptions on the figure of teacher as mentor. In addition, all participants touched on contextual barriers and limitations that affect the growth of a meaningful student-teacher relationship. While
these patterns are evident in all participants’ accounts, they were expressed differently in accordance with personalized teaching experience and cultural context.

This chapter is organized into four main themes and two subthemes that were identified in the data. Through my detailed report of these, I also consolidate findings with current research on related topics, highlighting convergences and divergences between the two.

4.1 Teachers as lifelong learners

All four participants are experienced senior high school teachers. Knowing how to foster a healthy student-teacher relationship does not occur in one’s first year of teaching. Andy has been teaching for 22 years, Maya 14 years, and Kumiko and Ayane 32 years each. Participants did not explicitly state their interest in teaching as the product of a lifelong love of learning, however each described that their interest in sharing and communicating knowledge comes from a personal pursuit of discovering this knowledge. Ayane articulated how her career choice came from a desire to use her knowledge of English in a professional context. She wanted to pursue this interest beyond her undergraduate studies. Isolating the theme of teachers as lifelong learners, I could discern how the participants expressed interest and passion in the teaching profession, the time they dedicate to continuously improving their practice and adapting to changes. Professional development is a necessary part of the job, but it requires more than attendance at workshops. It necessitates an appreciation for learning. Maya expressed this by saying that “[…] great teachers never stop learning, real educators do not put their own education on hold.”

Although responsible for teaching various subject areas in different cultural contexts, all participants similarly expressed an ongoing commitment to learning. Andy expresses a love for

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1 Note: All quotes from Maya have been translated directly from French to English by the author.
“[…] communicating appreciation for certain areas” which are, in this case, the subjects he teaches. For example he has only experiential qualifications in geography and teaches the course thanks to a strong, personal investment in the subject. Maya, who has been working as a high school guidance counsellor for most of her career, describes how educators are the ones who need to change and adapt to their students’ needs. Through her observations she believes classroom instruction needs to be reflective of the rapid changes happening in society. Possessing a contract and delivering the curriculum does not make a teacher. Kumiko and Ayane, both English language teachers in a secondary high school, describe having a passion for English language learning and being able to pursue a personal interest in foreign language in a professional setting. The time and energy all participants dedicate to their job, voluntarily spending long hours at school and extending their services outside of the classroom, demonstrates their commitment to learning.

In order to understand how educators develop meaningful and supportive relationships with students, I set the goal of understanding more about where the interest in teaching stems from. An educator who genuinely embraces and practices lifelong learning significantly contributes to a positive student-teacher relationship (Ayers, 2010). When both instructor and pupil are on the path to discovering knowledge, the classroom environment transforms into a space conducive to that pursuit (hooks, 2003). According to all participants, teachers develop a deeper connection with students if they consider establishing some common ground with them. The most obvious here is to perceive *themselves* as learners too.

How could educators reach out to students to ensure academic and social success at school, without contributing the extra time to make meaningful connections? Finding the time to relate to student experiences, as learners, benefits both instructor and pupil (hooks, 2003).
Educators cannot teach students how to learn if they do not perceive themselves as learners. And this is a great lesson teachers can share with students, that education does not have a finish line, it never ends. Each participant’s commitment to teaching underlines his or her interest in ongoing learning experiences, through professional development and personal, self-care practices. Their genuine accounts and actions highlight the passion and dedication invested in their work.

4.2 The ethic of care and investing in student success

Student success begins with a teacher who cares for and empathizes with the learner (Noddings, 1995). This theme brings to light the perceived impact of caring on student success from the teacher’s perspective. Caring highlights an awareness of student engagement with the course content, their classmates, and the school environment. Andy explains that students who are “[…] more at ease, more comfortable in the classroom” from knowing the teacher is “[…] empathetic, understanding, and generally interested in the students as people” benefit positively from their school experience. Maya says a child should not receive help only once he or she is failing, but calls upon teachers and staff to work together to provide help from the start of any issue that arises. Kumiko makes a point of making herself approachable, letting students know she is available for help. And when Ayane offers students advice, she shares what she believes is best for them, however gives them space to make a final decision on their own. She says part of her job is to give students the confidence needed to succeed. Participants are aware that caring provides more opportunities for student success, through means of additional help, support, and encouragement.

All participants, Canadian and Japanese, expressed genuine care to see their students succeed. Their perception of ‘student success’ does vary to a certain degree, however at the core
of each definition expressed is the best interest of the student. Every teacher described something along the lines of fostering a “healthy curiosity” and an “appreciation for learning” beyond graduation. The important thing is to see students as human beings, as real people with feelings and problems, with actual families and identity issues, to find the most appropriate way for them to reach their goals. Kumiko perceives success as students becoming independent, to graduate from high school and move on successfully in life by themselves. She claims the focus should not be on good and/or bad test scores, but rather on how hard students worked. Andy also refrains from determining success according to grades. He tries to see whether he was able to encourage students to want to learn more and develop open-mindedness towards different things. Ayane did emphasize the importance of good test scores, but her ultimate view of a student succeeding is to be independent and accomplish his or her own personal goals, stating: “Success in senior high is, I think, to grow as […] an adult.” Maya firmly believes that “The student comes before the course content. If you do not know your students, how will you effectively deliver the curriculum? It is up to the teacher to figure out how to adapt to individual student needs.”

The words used by participants are examples of ‘authentic care’: a genuine concern for and sincere commitment to fostering student abilities and skills (McHugh et al., 2013). Participants indicated having compassion and empathy for students and the work they produce, yet none made reference to the dangers of romanticizing the relationship between instructor and pupil (Hargreaves, 2000; McHugh et al., 2013). The benefits of caring, such as getting to know students better, their specific needs and influential factors, and the challenges involved, to reach out when necessary, communicating with parents and following study habits, were highlighted in participants’ responses. Their focus was on the importance of being a teacher who sincerely
cares about the student and his or her success; not whether actions taken can lead to serious fatigue and potential burnout (hooks, 2003; Mishlove, 2004).

Caring for the student is perceived as “part of the job”, yet is not made mandatory by any contract, whether in Canadian or Japanese school boards. Teachers feel they have to be available before and after school, at lunch, and, specifically in Japan, occasionally on the weekend. But they also do it because they care. Which is greater: their genuine concern or the pressure to deliver? Kumiko and Ayane, teaching in Shizuoka, spend an average of 1-2 more hours at school than Andy and Maya, for a total of 10-11 hours, the established norm in their educational system. However, Andy and Maya bring more work to complete at home. Does this mean that Kumiko and Ayane care more because they spend more time in the physical school building, tending to students? Due to the limited scope of this research project, I am unable to answer this question. Participants’ responses, such as Kumiko stating that she is “[…] willing to help them whenever they need any help,” show evidence that the care and dedication is genuine. Regardless of whether encouraged by personal willingness or pressure to perform effectively in the work place, caring contributes to success as it helps students build confidence in their learning abilities.

4.3 The bigger picture: being more than an instructor

Developing a meaningful connection with students necessitates taking on numerous roles that do not fall directly into teaching practices. Observing student reactions, acting upon them, seeking help from staff and administration, modifying course content, reaching out when necessary, signing kids up for summer school, etc., are practices participants embrace to foster positive relationships with students. When students are disengaged, factors lowering participation can stem from outside of the classroom. Getting to know who the student is, as a whole person, requires educators to go beyond the pages of the curriculum. All participants
described getting to know their students a lot better outside of the classroom environment, through extra-curricular activities, informal conversations about similar interests, events after school hours, class trips, and more. Andy emphasized the need for this relationship to develop “organically”, forging a decent working relationship on an informal basis. Maya claims that before any instruction to unfold the teacher has to know the student as an individual. Kumiko appreciates sharing mutual interests with her classes, before and after school hours. Ayane expressed she enjoys catching up with students during ‘cleaning time’, a practice in Japan at the end of each school day when the student body cleans the school: “They gather around me and talk a lot, about the, about their school life, about their friends, or something like that […]”. A strong sense of school community, collaboration between staff, and good communication with parents, are other factors mentioned that could positively affect the student-teacher relationship.

Answers provided reveal the need for teachers to involve themselves in students’ lives beyond classroom instruction in order to best support them in achieving goals, whether post-secondary, career-related or personal ones. Differences in accounts from Ontario and Shizuoka participants surface in this theme. Shizuoka participants are required to take on additional duties around school, such as organizing the timetable and managing finances, a task usually delegated to administrative staff for Ontario participants. In addition, all participants appear to embrace extra-curricular activities and the benefits it brings to knowing students better, however they are optional in Ontario schools and yet in Shizuoka, according to Ayane, it is “[…] legally not a duty, but it’s mandatory”. Teachers’ unions have a far lesser presence in Japanese schools than they do in Canadian ones. In Japan, the Board of Education controls class sizes and determines the number of teachers allowed on a given staff. That being said, longer hours spent at school for students—studying, playing sports, etc.—and for teachers—grading, coaching, etc.—does
provide more opportunity for educator and learner to interact. Does this ultimately strengthen the student-teacher relationship? My analysis points to the understanding that teachers who spend more time in the learning environment, on school grounds, contribute more positively to their relationships with students than those who put in the minimum required number of hours. That being said, teachers need unions to ensure their working hours are not abused—the opposite of which is observed in Japan. Findings suggest a smaller presence from unions and greater risk of burnout is a recipe for closer student-teacher relationships.

Although no participant referred to practicing holistic education, evidence of a strong dedication to knowing more about the student certainly lines up with this approach. In order to effectively engage the whole child in the learning process, educators need to be cognizant of the fact that they are still in a developmental stage—not yet adults in this case—and bring a wealth of unique abilities to the learning environment (Ayers, 2010; Feuerverger, 2007; Miller, 1998; Samuel and Suh, 2012). Andy, Maya, Kumiko, and Ayane shared the importance of looking at the ‘bigger picture’ to help students succeed: addressing more than the student’s academic successes and failures (Miller, 1998). Research shows that teachers need to ensure students feel safe and well cared for among their peers in the learning community, before being able to effectively tend to their academic goals and achievements (Davis and Dupper, 2004). They fill in non-instructional roles that benefit the student in their academic and personal growth (Davis and Dupper, 2004; Jackson-Crossland, 2000; McHugh et al., 2013; Paris, 2008).

This theme exemplifies a need for educators to embrace reflective practices and provide tailored, constructive support when students need it. Differences between Ontario and Shizuoka highlight the variations in structural support and organizational factors that offer students a chance to achieve their goals. Whether enforced by contract, perceived as mandatory, or done by
personal willingness, educators who take on the responsibility of devoting time to know their students can help them succeed. As Maya articulated: “The student comes before the curriculum.”

4.4 Being a mentor: self-perception vs. reality

Embracing the role of teacher as mentor involves getting personally closer to the student to know them better and effectively meet his or her needs at school. Although descriptions provided by all four participants of their interactions with students contain evidence of this, definitions regarding ‘mentorship’ vary. One of the key differences is in their definition of and reaction to what it means to be a mentor. Their actions may be a reflection of taking on a mentoring role, however some participants hold reservations in regards to being labelled a ‘mentor’. Also, some were more willing to talk about their mentoring roles around the school than others. Isolating this theme helps to identify what factors and structural elements impact a teacher’s ability of becoming a great mentor to her or his students.

4.4.1 Barriers and limitations

In regards to teachers taking on a mentoring role, certain barriers and limitations come through participants’ answers. Contract limitations, in terms of legally prescribed duties, can act as barriers to knowing students better and supporting them through troubling times, whether academic or personal. However, Ontario and Shizuoka participants appear to face different barriers when it comes to assisting students. Teachers in Canada and Japan are permitted to reach out to students in different ways.

Ontario participants are limited by their contract and unable to help students past a certain point when it comes to particular issues they bring to a teacher’s attention. Andy explains that he simply cannot do everything for the student, when something is out of his scope of expertise he
redirects the student to a guidance counsellor. He sees that as part of being a mentor, pointing
people in the right direction. Maya, now a guidance counsellor, regularly meets with students
experiencing trouble outside of school. She expresses frustrations at non-cooperating staff, when
they are unwilling to take extra measures to ensure a student’s success in light of problems
outside. Overall, Shizuoka participants seem more involved in their students’ lives than Ontario
participants. They act both as the teacher and guidance counsellor. When issues arise at home,
the homeroom teacher is responsible for understanding exactly what is going on and bringing it
to the attention of the administration. Ontario participants, on the other hand, delegate any
serious issue brought up by a student, outside of the teacher’s territory, to the guidance
counsellor, administration, and/or social worker. Their job description does not legally allow for
this kind of assistance. However, Shizuoka participants even go as far as making home visits and
checking on students refusing to attend school. The greatest barrier shared by Kumiko and
Ayane in getting closer to students is parents. Andy and Maya talked about the importance of
maintaining healthy and positive communication with parents. However Kumiko and Ayane both
shared how a parent’s lack of trust in a teacher can create serious difficulties in reaching the
student. Both participants have had students who refused to attend school, facing parents who
openly did not trust them to advise and teach their child—for example regarding a course of
study or which university application to fill out. Ayane explained that Japanese parents often
want to see their dreams fulfilled by their child. If a teacher has the child’s best interest at heart
(not the parents’), he or she may conflict with the parents’ view of what is “best” for the child.

This elucidates how a parent’s involvement in their child’s education could be a highly
positive or negative experience for the child and/or the teacher. Comparing participant responses,
my analysis points to the understanding that Japanese parents are more deeply involved—to the
point of interfering—in their child’s education than Canadian parents. Andy and Maya deal with their fair share of issues with parents and guardians, yet they spoke of it as one of several factors contributing to a child’s educative experience. Kumiko and Ayane spoke more of the potential for parents to hinder the learning experience. Cultural pressures to perform effectively in Japanese society could be pushing parents to have greater control over the course of their child’s educational career. Perhaps there are systems in place that encourage students in Canada to be more independent from the start of high school, by both teachers and parents. While in Japan, students rely heavily on the opinions and advice of higher authorities up until Graduation Day.

Research studies illustrate that a positive student-teacher relationship can have a significant impact on a student’s decision to stay in school (Davis and Dupper, 2004; McHugh et al., 2013). Kumiko and Ayane both share the opinion that the additional roles they adopt are part of the profession. Their job description hints at how they might be underestimating the influence their work can have on a student’s experiences at school and beyond graduation. Working closely with students, educators have the opportunity to distinguish the more deeply rooted issues causing a student to act out (Ovando, 2003). Teachers can offer a wealth of assistance and guidance, yet there are legal barriers and cultural influences that impose restrictions on how much they can provide.

Comparing some of the elements that make up the educational systems in both of these countries illustrates how teachers cannot do everything on their own. They cannot tend to every issue that arises in a child’s life, even if they have the best intentions. My findings suggest however that a Japanese teacher who acts both as instructor and guidance counsellor has access to helping students in more ways than a teacher working in Canada. Yet no matter what structural factors are in place to help the instructor, or how strong his or her personal willingness
to help students succeed may be, the job requires teachers to work with others. Many feel pressure to care for their students to the point of burnout. But teaching is collaborative work; it involves administrative staff and guidance counsellors, building good relations with parents and other active members in the school community. Neither system is in any way strikingly better than the other, but this comparison certainly opens the discussion on questioning some of the practices found in each.

4.4.2 Contextual differences

When it comes to being a mentor, circumstantial and contextual differences affect the ways in which teachers embrace the role. This means the structure and organization of the school could have an impact on the teacher’s ability to embrace mentorship. In this study, whether a factor of cultural or personal difference, Ontario participants noticeably displayed more comfort and ease in talking about mentorship in relation to their practice, as opposed to Shizuoka participants who either struggled to find the words to describe themselves as mentors, or did not perceive themselves as mentors at all. This theme highlights a disconnect between what Shizuoka participants say they do in their school environments, and how they perceive their practice.

Ontario participants expressed a greater willingness to talk about mentoring type roles and situations. Andy for one mentioned that he does not perceive himself as a mentor in the formal sense of the word, where mentor and mentee are assigned to each other and schedule, say, four official meetings in a year. Yet, he accepts the term on a more informal basis. He perceives mentoring relationships as developing organically from informal conversations talking about similar interests, career paths, life choices, and more. Andy explains how the relationship is not forced: “[…] it’s something that, to be honest with you, just happens”. Perhaps from her years
working as a guidance counsellor, Maya recognizes a mentor as a model to students. And to be a great model is to have a lot of responsibility towards them, closely following their progress. Maya says she can recall numerous situations where she took on the role of mentor. She is certainly the participant who displayed the most comfort using the word to describe herself, reflecting her firm belief that acknowledging the student as a whole individual comes before addressing the subject matter.

Shizuoka participants were significantly less willing to talk about themselves as mentors. Their responses did however indicate that their definition of mentorship aligns with the one guiding my research. Yet their lack of association with the label could perhaps be a result of cultural difference, as expressed by Ayane, mentorship “[…] is a very, kind of, very heavy word” she adds, “I’ve never thought of me as a mentor […] I’m just a teacher”. She sees physical education teachers as greater mentors to their students, because of intense coaching involved regarding sports teams and long hours spent together outside of class. She admits she wants to make sure her students succeed, supporting them, talking outside of class, making house calls, assisting with university applications, and offering extra help. Yet, she concludes by saying it is part of her job and does not perceive herself as a mentor in any sense of the word. Kumiko, on the other hand, hesitantly articulated how she perceives mentorship. To her, a mentoring relationship is a close one with the student, based on something in common, such as similar interests. It means offering advice when asked and meeting again in the future, hopefully as friends rather than as mentor-mentee. Her focus was less on the use of the term ‘mentor’ but rather on how instructor and pupil can both benefit from a close relationship. Ayane and Kumiko provided answers that suggested they do not perceive the work they do as worthy or reflective of such a title.
Despite Ayane and Kumiko’s hesitation of using the term ‘mentor’ to describe their roles, an example of structurally integrated mentorship in Japanese high schools is their homeroom system, nonexistent in Canada. In this system, students are organized into homerooms, by grade, and assigned a head homeroom teacher, and one or two sub-homeroom teachers. Homeroom students attend all classes and participate in all school-wide events together. Depending on the high school, homerooms may change every year, or only in the second year of study. The homeroom community ensures students have supervisory teachers to talk to whenever an issue arises, school-related or personal. This reflects the Confucian approach to education, where the teacher, perceived as an “exemplar” at the front of the class, possessor of higher knowledge, involved in almost all aspects of the student’s life (Fowler et al., 2002; LeTendre, 1996).

Teachers play a role in every aspect of school life and this filters into the lives of students as well. The responsibility for collectively managing the school, scheduling events, handling finances, and more, sets up an example for students to follow. Teachers mentor their students, and in turn senior students mentor junior students (LeTendre, 1996). This system is embedded in everyday practices and pedagogy. As reflected in Ayane and Kumiko’s answers, although Japanese educators may not label themselves as mentors, embracing the role is an integral part of their job.

This theme highlights how cultural differences and structurally implemented programs in schools influence opportunities for teachers to adopt a mentoring role. Ontario participants described being mentors by personal willingness and dedication to the profession, a choice made to better reach out to students and increase their chances of reaching success. Shizuoka participants provided mixed responses. Yet, the structural system in place in Japanese high schools ensures they provide some form of mentorship regardless of personal perception on the
role. These factors and resources support them in offering more assistance to those in need. All participants take on additional roles that go beyond the curriculum: how these roles are perceived and adopted tells a different story.

4.5 Concluding thoughts

In this chapter I reviewed pertinent findings in the data collected from interviews with four experienced senior high school teachers in Ontario, Canada and Shizuoka, Japan. Similarities and differences emerged from participants’ responses. Ontario and Shizuoka participants shared similar views on reasons why they chose the teaching profession, their mutual pursuit of lifelong learning, and desire to share their personal thirst for knowledge with students. Each participant also spoke to practicing ‘authentic care’ in the learning environment, expressing sincere concern for and commitment to students’ success and overall well-being (McHugh et al., 2013). Differences in participants’ responses emerged in the perception of the various roles they adopt on a daily basis. These could be a result of personality type, cultural difference, contextual setting, or other unidentified factors. Overall Ontario participants were more willing to talk about themselves as mentors than Shizuoka participants. Particular barriers enforced in the diverse cultural contexts, such as contract regulations, also impact how participants are able to adopt these roles. And finally, responses brought to light differences in structurally integrated mentorship and the act of embracing the role from personal willingness. Both highlight different approaches yet effectively support the student.

The cross-cultural lens of this study reveals alternative approaches to educating the whole student. Through Japanese participants’ responses my Canadian readers will notice mentoring strategies and ways of embracing the student-teacher relationship to which they are unaccustomed. The goal of this cross-cultural approach is to take a step back from our familiar,
Ontario teaching practices to recognize and appreciate the pedagogical methods that represent the foundation of respected and admired foreign educational frameworks. Excellent teachers are learners themselves, continually searching for new strategies and ways to develop their professional practice. By abandoning our comfort zones and exploring an unknown context, we engage in a process of self-discovery and learn more about our personal and professional identities.

In the next chapter, I address the implications of these research findings in relation to the broader educational community and my professional identity as a teacher. I also make connections to my personal philosophy of teaching and practice. Finally, I conclude this study by making recommendations and suggestions for future research on this topic.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter I review the initial goals, significant outcomes, and key findings of my cross-cultural research study. The reason I chose to explore the student-teacher relationship, with a close look on mentorship, is because my experiences teaching abroad in Shizuoka, Japan for three years reaffirmed my belief in the figure of teacher as mentor as crucial to a student’s academic success, personal growth, and overall well-being. I developed an interest in examining how mentorship is perceived by teachers in Ontario and in Shizuoka, and how they believe it contributes to a positive student-teacher relationship—whether by personal willingness, legal obligations, and/or structural factors. I set out to study how teachers navigate this relationship in these different cultural contexts. There is significant value in examining strategies outside the realm of accepted practice in Ontario to study the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning.

In my literature review I looked at what researchers found in regards to mentorship in the classroom, cross-cultural approaches to pedagogy, and fostering lifelong learning in students. I looked at teachers’ perceptions of their role as mentors to the whole student in and beyond the classroom, and the challenges and benefits of taking on this role. I also opened an international dialogue on mentorship in education comparing views from Canada and Japan.

To deepen existing knowledge on this topic my qualitative research involved semi-structured interviews with four experienced high school teachers currently working in Ontario, Canada and in Shizuoka, Japan. Themes identified in my participants’ responses include their lifelong love of learning, genuine regard for the ethic of care, deep-seated understanding of being more than in instructor, and diverse perceptions on the figure of teacher as mentor. Through my participants’ accounts I identified contextual barriers and limitations that affect the development
of a positive, meaningful student-teacher relationship. The extent to which a teacher can help a student is limited by structural factors, contractual obligations, and socio-cultural views. The general consensus among all participants is the best relationships with students are ones that develop “organically” outside of the classroom environment.

In the remainder of this chapter I will provide an overview of the major findings of my study and potential impact of these on the broader educational community. I will elaborate on some of the implications of this research and suggest practical recommendations that might contribute to teachers more effectively navigating their multiple roles in and beyond the classroom, including that of mentor. I then move onto discussing some areas worthy of further investigation and make concluding comments on the significance of my research.

5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

This study identified differing cultural approaches to the student-teacher relationship and opinions on mentorship. Similarities between Ontario and Shizuoka participants were reflected in how teachers approach developing a deeper connection with students: particularly in establishing common ground and perceiving themselves as learners too. Each participant noted the importance of seeing students as real people with feelings and problems, in order to effectively help them reach academic and personal goals. Ultimately caring provides more opportunities for student success through means of additional help, support and encouragement.

All participants perceive caring as “part of the job” yet teaching contracts in Ontario and Shizuoka school boards do not explicitly enforce it. They feel the need to be available before and after school, during lunch, also on the weekends in Japan, but also claim to do it because they care. Unfortunately this study is too limited in scope to determine whether personal willingness or the pressure to perform effectively in the workplace has a greater influence on making
teachers care. Nonetheless, findings highlight that caring contributes to student success because it promotes confidence in their learning abilities. Teachers need to involve themselves in students’ lives beyond curriculum documents to best support them in achieving goals, whether post-secondary, career-related, or personal.

Differences emerge across cultures when it comes to providing this help. In Shizuoka providing extra help and participating in extra-curriculars is not contractually required, but perceived mandatory. Teachers are obliged however by contract to take on managerial roles in the school. In Ontario extra-curriculars are optional and management responsibilities are delegated to administrative staff. Although Shizuoka teachers tend not to label themselves as mentors, participants reported they act as both instructors and guidance counsellors to students. Ontario teachers, who more willingly used the term mentor to describe their work, are legally required to redirect the student to a guidance counsellor, social worker, and/or administrative staff member when approached with a troublesome issue. Shizuoka teachers handle it themselves first, and subsequently involve other parties depending on the severity of the situation. In all, whether enforced by contract or personal willingness, being a mentor and dedicating more time to students promotes success. In Shizuoka this understanding generally seems to come from structural factors in place, and in Ontario it emerges more from one’s own will. Cultural contexts that influence societal views of education, negotiate teacher contracts, and determine legal barriers, account for these differences.

While Ontario teachers face legal restrictions in reaching out to students, Shizuoka teachers perceive a parent’s lack of trust as a significant obstacle in helping them. As a result of a Shizuoka teacher’s proximity and involvement in the student’s life, parents and teachers may expose differing opinions more often than their Ontario counterparts. Parents want the best for
their children but this may sometimes interfere with their education and the teacher’s professional view. When discussing parents, Ontario teachers emphasized maintaining healthy communication with them. Overall the distance between teacher and parent seems greater in Ontario relative to Shizuoka: in some cases making it more difficult for the teacher to get to know students better. These findings highlight that no matter how much the teacher cares, external factors may always get in the way of building positive and supportive student-teacher relationships. Ultimately, teaching is collaborative work: support is sought from staff, parents, guardians, caregivers, administration, etc. to make student success a reality. Effectively and constructively embracing mentorship involves a number of obstacles including navigating legal barriers and dominant socio-cultural views.

5.2 Implications

In this section I will look at implications of a cross-cultural comparative study between Ontario and Shizuoka on the broader educational community and my own professional identity and practice. I examine possible outcomes of findings for particular stakeholders such as students, parents, and educators, and understand how it may influence my work as a beginning teacher in Ontario.

5.2.1 Broad implications

Understanding reasons why some parents stand in the way of student success is a finding with implications for the broader educational research community. Students need resources and support to make informed decisions, regarding personal, academic, and/or career-related goals for themselves. They should have the knowledge to critically examine their options. Parents who do not trust teachers, administration and/or other school staff in guiding students to make informed choices ultimately stand in the way of the student’s success. The student needs to feel
comfortable and confident in seeking advice from their mentor. Participants express feeling conflicted when a parent challenges their approach—they might seek help from colleagues and/or administration to resolve such a situation. Teachers are more than instructors; they work with numerous parties to cater to one individual learner. They handle many concerns happening outside of the classroom environment to promote student achievement (Ayers, 2010; hooks, 2003).

The combination of structural factors, contractual obligations and socio-cultural views limiting the extent to which a teacher can mentor a student, is another finding relevant to the educational community. In critical cases, due to factors outside of a teacher’s control, a student may not get the attention he or she desperately needs. Parents may not be aware of structural limitations that influence their child’s education—not being thoroughly knowledgeable on the extent of a teacher’s responsibilities. Teachers can face challenging barriers in reaching out to students even when they have their best interest at heart. Teaching is emotional and involves personal investment on behalf of the teacher to witness student success. Teachers adopt numerous roles and face countless factors that can increase stress, potentially leading to burnout making them ineffective educators (hooks, 2003; Mishlove, 2004).

And finally, whether from personal willingness or the pressure to perform effectively in the work environment teachers in Ontario and Shizuoka believe caring contributes to student success. This finding should encourage administrators to foster a school environment based on care and nurturing, less so on discipline and hard and fast rules. The educational research community needs to focus on how caring teachers lead to student success, necessitating a deeper look at putting the student before the curriculum and examining where the idea of caring originates from—individual personality or the pressure to perform well at work. Teacher
education programs should focus on integrating a stronger emphasis on the ethic of care into programming by using a more holistic approach to educational practices, highlighting the benefits of caring for students and seeing them as whole people. When students know and feel they are cared for it is positively reflected in their work (Noddings, 1995; 2012). Good mentorship needs to be meaningful and constructive to the student (Samuel and Suh, 2012).

5.2.2 Narrow implications

Parents and caregivers may have alternate perceptions or attitudes towards their child. Sometimes the educator’s and parents’ strategies are not aligned due to poor communication. This finding will have an impact on my own professional identity and practice. Thanks to this research study I have become more aware of a wider range of potential issues arising with parents. I recognize parents’ voices are absent in this study, being unable to question their perspective on the relations they have with their child’s teacher. However limited in scope, this project has further strengthened my teaching philosophy by reinforcing the importance of open communication and being transparent about my practice and methods. It has also supported my belief in teachers working outside the classroom to ensure success within the learning environment. I am now more inclined to be involved in parent council in my future workplace—something I previously had not seriously reflected on as an effective method to promote greater trust between teacher, parent, and student.

Caring—whether from personal will or workplace pressure—as a contributing factor to student success is another finding that reinforces my existing teaching philosophy and reaffirms my goal to be a teacher-mentor. However, I will take necessary precautions not to be exceedingly emotional or be too personally involved in my approach to caring for students (Hargreaves, 2000). I will strive to put the individual before the curriculum to best promote their
achievement. I would consider seeking out a school community that values mentorship in its mission and values, and prides itself in programming that support a mentor-mentee relationship between educator and learner. Although my findings will significantly impact my professional practice, I understand that as a researcher they are limited in scope and validity due to a small sample size. In terms of methodology I would be interested in uncovering what my participants’ students would share on the topic of mentorship and care and observe how it compares with their teachers’ views. These findings would contribute both to my skills as a researcher and further enrich my pedagogical practice.

5.3 Recommendations

My participants’ accounts and literature review highlight how caring teacher leads to greater opportunities of witnessing students succeed in academic and personal goals. Caring and compassion are needed in the classroom to promote a healthy attitude towards learning. To create meaningful delivery the student needs to come before the curriculum. Integrating more opportunities into the school schedule for teachers to know their students better—without risking burnout—and vice versa would benefit their success. Administrators should focus on developing safe spaces based on the ethic of care by integrating concern for the emotional well-being and mental health of students into everyday routine. This could be carried out via diverse workshops, special events, guest speakers, and school celebrations. This would have students gain more trust in their leaders, and allow both parties to see each other outside the rigid confines of the classroom context. I would also recommend adding an international component to teacher education programs. I would encourage professors to integrate more literature on international educational frameworks and encourage beginning teachers to take their skills abroad. I am biased in light of my international teaching experience, however I do believe that there is significant
value and opportunity in learning outside of an Ontario classroom. No system or framework is perfect, yet many of them are successful in their own right and demonstrate high standards of education. Stepping outside of Ontario and even Canada can provide a highly enriching learning experience to expand our horizons by uncovering diverse approaches to pedagogy.

In light of the structural factors limiting the extent to which teachers can reach out to their students, another recommendation I suggest is perhaps modifying and/or removing some of the legal barriers preventing Ontario teachers from more effectively helping students in need. Integrating this component into teacher education programs by adding an element of guidance counselling to the profession in Ontario may entail greater academic and personal success for students. This would require additional courses and specialized training in counselling. I recognize how this suggestion could be a point of contention, seeing as Ontario schools have unique positions for specialized guidance counsellors and adding this role to a teacher’s load may be negatively perceived. My suggestion could backfire, yet my analysis highlights how legal restrictions on a teacher’s responsibilities towards students stand in the way of better knowing them and benefiting their achievement. The Ontario Ministry of Education could entertain the idea of adopting certain elements from the Japanese system where the teacher is seen as someone trustworthy students can seek assistance from no matter how troubling their issues may be. This would promote a holistic approach to the student-teacher relationship and integrate a more comprehensive view of teachers as mentors into curriculum documents. Given the appropriate tools, resources, and education, teachers will not have to redirect a student at a time of need.
5.4 Areas for further research

Educational scholars should next direct their attention on promoting a greater inclusion of mentorship in teacher education programs. How can mentorship have a stronger presence in a beginning teacher’s professional development? How can they learn more on the benefits and challenges of becoming a teacher-mentor? What can university institutions do to provide beginning teachers with greater exposure to the additional roles involved in the profession? Courses and programming offered focus heavily on curriculum delivery and effective assessment. Mentoring challenges this structure because it places the student’s needs before content. Through a mentorship lens I believe that teachers can better inform their students and guide them to academic achievements, personal success, supporting their mental health and well-being along the way.

Another suggestion is to examine what makes teachers care. What do educators mean when they talk about caring? Does it become acceptable for teachers to care less when students are still achieving? What are they concerned with? Several times throughout this project I have mentioned that caring might originate from personal will or workplace pressure. If researchers could determine how and why teachers are led to care for their students perhaps program developers could integrate these findings more directly into teacher education agendas. An extension of this investigation would be to study the impact of caring on student outcomes by looking at the student’s perspective of the support they receive at school. How to measure and evaluate care would also need to be determined. How do students feel when they are most acknowledged and supported in the learning environment and how can teachers improve their practice using this information?

Finally I would be interested in a deeper cross-cultural comparison of contractual obligations across school boards in Canada and Japan. My research study examined surface
details of board contracts in these respective sites. A more detailed look at these documents to establish exactly what they say and observe how they are reflected in different school environments would reveal how closely educators follow contracts. Do they engage in numerous activities outside of prescribed duties? Are these done voluntarily or upon request by administration? Does the contract offer flexibility? Is it always respected? Answers to such questions would reveal how the contract is actualized in the workplace and how much significance is given to the document when professional responsibilities are established. Understanding how administration follows or deviates from board contracts could illustrate the impact of these decisions on student learning and achievements.

5.5 Final comments

Almost five years ago now I embarked on the adventure to teach abroad at a suburban Japanese high school. Back then I had no fathomable idea this experience would eventually play a substantial role in shaping the topic of my future MTRP. Little did I even imagine conducting research in the field of education, neither had I any plan to pursue graduate studies at the time. I believe every individual is a product of the experiences they have had, both positive and negative, opportunities both accepted and refused. Any and all experience can influence one’s professional practice and future course, although sometimes realized much later. The key idea is to take advantage and make the most out of every situation—who knows where it could lead? As a new resident in Shizuoka and obviously a foreigner, my position as an English language teacher necessitated I give up some “Westernisms” I was unaware I even possessed—such as following my contract hours to the minute, expecting regular feedback on my performance, and never expecting to work weekends. The Japanese work/life balance is difficult to navigate for an outsider, and I noticed for locals too. I got to know my colleagues well and watched many of
them, most of these women with families at home, struggle to maintain a healthy balance between their demanding careers and personal lives. As a result of these challenges experienced and observed, my three years in Shizuoka was rich with self-discovery. As I got used to my new surroundings, my undergraduate studies in social/cultural anthropology influenced my curiosity to learn more about the differences and similarities underlying the educational systems I was familiar with and the one I suddenly needed to adapt to. My colleagues had also primarily been exposed to one educational system their entire lives and the ideas and insights we exchanged contributed to a highly stimulating professional work environment. I uncovered a new world of teaching, and began to reflect on how diverse educational frameworks could borrow key ideas from each other to ultimately improve learning environments.

My research matters because it encourages collaboration—a central tenet of successful school environments—between educational communities across cultures for the benefit of learning. Working together, sharing and comparing, new knowledge is created to benefit all educators and aspiring professionals. There is a wealth of information to be discovered by stepping outside of our own contexts and distancing ourselves from comfort zones. Thanks to my three years in Japan I uncovered different approaches to educating the whole student. I learned of mentoring strategies and valuing the student-teacher relationship in ways that I had not experienced growing up in Canada. I would encourage more teachers to take the opportunity of gaining international teaching experience. The work involves a lot of trial and error, but represents an incredible opportunity to learn more about oneself—in regards to both personal identity and professional practice. Beginning teachers discover new capacities, skills, and abilities they could not have discovered in the confining classrooms of their familiar and well-known teacher education program.
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APPENDIX A: Letter of consent

Monday, September 28th 2015

Dear ___________________,

My name is Evelina Sienkiewicz and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research focuses on teachers’ perceptions of their responsibilities towards fostering meaningful relationship with students both inside and outside of the classroom. I am engaging in a cross-cultural study exploring the student-teacher relationship in two vastly different yet well-renowned educational frameworks found in Canadian and Japanese schools. The aim of this work will be to highlight strengths and weaknesses within the culturally diverse approaches. I am interested in interviewing teachers who adopt additional, supportive and/or mentoring roles towards their students, whether inside or outside of the classroom. I am looking for participants who believe that building meaningful rapport with students can help promote learning goals and overall personal growth. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide valuable insight into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. This data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only people who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Dr. Eloise Tan. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to participation, and I will share with you a copy of the transcript to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Evelina Sienkiewicz
eva.sienkiewicz@mail.utoronto.ca
Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by Evelina Sienkiewicz and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: __________________________
APPENDIX B: Interview protocol

Introduction (date, location, time) Thank you for participating in this project. This aim of this research is to learn about teachers’ perceptions of their responsibilities towards fostering meaningful relationship with students both inside and outside of the classroom. This is a cross-cultural study exploring Canadian and Japanese perspectives, to highlight strengths and weaknesses within the culturally diverse approaches. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes. I want to remind you of your right to choose to not answer any question.

Section 1: Background information
1. Where did you grow up?
2. How many years have you been working as a teacher? What do you currently teach? (grades, subjects) What grades and subjects have you previously taught?
3. Where do you teach? How many years have you been at this school?
4. Can you tell me more about the school you currently teach in? (size, demographics, program priorities)
5. What drew you to teaching at the senior level?
6. How many hours per day, on average, do you spend at school?
   How many hours per day, on average, do you spend working at home?*
   How many days per week, on average, are you at school?
   *What are the hours outside of instructional time spent doing?
7. What roles in addition to classroom teacher do you enact in your school / with your students?

Section 2: Teacher beliefs and practices
8. From your years of experience, how would you define student success? What steps do you take in the classroom to help students achieve this success? What steps do you take outside of the classroom to help students achieve this success?
9. To what extent do you believe teachers should be involved in students’ lives inside the school and beyond? What kinds of activities do you consider to be reasonable within the scope of that involvement? (i.e. from academic goals and making the honour roll, to finding a job, filling out university applications, etc.)
10. To what extent are you involved in students’ lives inside and outside of school? In what ways are you involved?
   → How does your practice reflect that you are more than an instructor?
11. What extra-curricular activities do you assist at school? What extra-curricular activities did you previously assist?
   → Are these voluntary or mandatory? How do you perceive these duties?
12. Beyond classroom learning and participation in extra-curricular activities, what are some other ways that you get to know your students better?
13. How do you know the relationship you have with a student is meaningful?
14. What does mentorship mean to you? What does it involve?
15. Do you consider yourself to be a mentor? If yes, why? If no, why not?
16. How do you typically begin to take on the role of mentor?
   → Why do you set out to know your students better? When do you know it is appropriate and/or necessary to reach out to some more than others?
17. What goals do you set when you build relationships with your students?
18. Can you give me an example of a relationship that you have with a student whereby you consider yourself to be a mentor?
   i. Who is the student?
   ii. In what ways do you act as a mentor to this student?
   iii. How do you support this student’s success inside and outside of school?
   iv. How does this student respond to your efforts?
   v. What outcomes do you believe your efforts as a mentor have had on this student and why?
19. What do you believe teachers can gain from building meaningful relationships with their students? And what do you believe students can gain from having meaningful relationships with their teachers?

Section 4: Influencing factors
20. How might teachers experience barriers when trying to know students better—when trying to build a meaningful relationship?
What challenges have you experienced? How did you respond to these challenges? How do you think the education system could further assist you in responding to these challenges?

21. What factors and resources support you in building relationships with students?

Section 5: Next steps

22. What advice would you give a beginning teacher looking to take on a mentoring role in the classroom? In helping students beyond academic objectives?

Thank you for your participation and time.