

Building Bonds: A Relationship-Centered Toolkit for Promoting Engagement and SEL in the Elementary Classroom

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers across the country are navigating a complex and rapidly changing educational landscape. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools have experienced a sharp increase in social, emotional, and behavioral challenges among students while also facing heightened expectations for academic recovery (García & Weiss, 2023; Mahoney & Weissberg, 2023; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2023). Within this context, student engagement has emerged as one of the most pressing issues in elementary education. Engagement is not only a predictor of academic success—it reflects students’ sense of belonging, motivation, and connection to their learning community.

This project, *Building Bonds: A Relationship-Centered Toolkit for Promoting Engagement and SEL in the Elementary Classroom*, addresses this urgent need by providing teachers with practical, research-based strategies to strengthen relationships and promote social-emotional learning (SEL) in their classrooms. The goal is to translate theory into action, bridging the gap between what educators know about the power of relationships and what they are equipped to do daily to foster those relationships in meaningful ways. This professional project responds to the need for practical, relationship-centered instructional support. The final product of this project is the *Building Bonds* toolkit, a digital, teacher-friendly resource designed to support relationship-building, student engagement, and social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms.

Context

This project emerges from my professional experience as a fourth-grade teacher at a small rural Title I school that serves approximately 350–400 students across fourth and fifth

grades. Our student population represents a diverse range of learning needs and backgrounds, including students from low-income households, multilingual learners, and children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This diversity enriches the school community while also requiring intentional instructional planning to ensure all students receive meaningful and equitable support. The school community is characterized by dedication, collaboration, and a shared commitment to student growth.

With almost two years of teaching experience and time spent in the teacher licensure program at Western Oregon University, I quickly learned that engagement does not occur automatically through academic instruction alone. Research suggests that students must feel emotionally safe, seen, and valued before they can engage deeply with learning (Pianta et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). During and after the pandemic, it became increasingly clear that social-emotional development and relationship-building were not optional components of teaching – they were foundational. In the years following COVID-19, our district placed an intentional emphasis on SEL and trauma-informed instruction, encouraging teachers to integrate social skills, self-regulation, and emotional awareness into daily routines.

However, implementing SEL consistently presented significant challenges, especially in relation to time constraints. Teachers are balancing rigorous academic standards, assessment requirements, and behavioral expectations, often leaving little time for intentional relationship-building or reflective SEL work. This tension—between the urgent need for connection and the pressure to meet curricular goals—has made it difficult for many educators to prioritize the relational side of teaching even when they know it makes a difference (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Pianta et al., 2012).

Another evolving factor influencing student engagement is the increasing presence of technology both in classrooms and in students' everyday cultural and social experiences. Since the pandemic, digital learning tools have become deeply embedded in instruction (García & Weiss, 2023; Mahoney & Weissberg, 2023). While one-to-one devices such as iPads have expanded opportunities for personalized learning and creativity, they have also introduced new complexities. Many students now struggle with sustained attention, self-regulation, and face-to-face communication. Teachers are simultaneously expected to integrate technology effectively and maintain authentic classroom connections. Balancing these competing demands requires new strategies that preserve human connection in an increasingly digital learning environment. These experiences inspired the creation of this professional project: a “Relationship-Centered Teacher Toolkit” that helps teachers design classrooms where connection drives learning. The project reflects my belief that even within the constraints of time, technology, and standards, it is possible to build meaningful relationships that foster engagement, belonging, and growth.

Rationale

The rationale for this project is both personal and professional. As an educator, I have seen how deeply relationships shape student engagement and achievement. Students who feel known and supported are more willing to take risks, persist through challenges, and invest effort in their work. Conversely, students who lack relational connection often disengage, both behaviorally and emotionally. Research strongly supports these observations. Roorda et al. (2011) found that effective teacher-student relationships are directly linked to academic engagement and achievement, while Hughes and Chen (2011) demonstrated that reciprocal relationships between teachers and students enhance motivation and self-efficacy.

At the elementary school where I taught, the need for relationship-based approaches is amplified by the socioeconomic and emotional diversity of the student population. Many students arrive at school carrying external stressors that influence their ability to focus and participate. SEL practices and strong teacher-student relationships can act as protective factors, buffering the effects of adversity and fostering resilience. Yet, despite widespread agreement about their importance, these practices are often fragmented or implemented inconsistently. Teachers may use isolated SEL activities or community-building exercises, but without an integrated framework, it is difficult to sustain long-term impact.

Technology adds another layer to this complexity. The post-pandemic classroom relies heavily on digital tools such as one-to-one devices, online learning platforms, and interactive instructional software. While technology can be a powerful tool for differentiation and engagement, it can also fragment attention and reduce opportunities for face-to-face interpersonal interaction. Many students are accustomed to fast-paced, screen-based learning, which can make slower, relationship-centered processes - like dialogue, collaboration, and reflection - more difficult to sustain. Teachers now face the dual challenge of using technology to enhance learning while maintaining the relational and emotional connections that support true engagement.

This project seeks to fill that gap by creating a toolkit that integrates relationship-building, social-emotional learning, and engagement strategies into one cohesive resource. The toolkit provides ready-to-use routines, activities, and templates that can be adapted to different classrooms and technological contexts. Each component is intentionally designed to support teachers in embedding relational practices into daily instruction rather than treating them as separate initiatives. The toolkit prioritizes accessibility and practicality so that educators can

implement strategies with minimal preparation while still aligning with research-based practices. Relationships are not one more task to add to teaching. They are the foundation that makes effective teaching possible. This belief guides the design of the toolkit across face-to-face, digital, and blended learning environments.

The challenges and opportunities described above highlight that engagement in today's classrooms is a multifaceted issue - one that extends beyond curriculum or management. A framework that unites the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning can address these complexities. The theoretical foundations for such an approach can be found in the work of scholars who view learning as inherently relational and socially constructed. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) framework for social-emotional learning, and research on culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995), this project integrates these perspectives to guide both the design and intent of the *Building Bonds Toolkit*.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

This project is anchored in Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development, which posits that learning occurs first through social interaction before it is internalized by the individual. According to Vygotsky (1978), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) represents the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with support from a more knowledgeable other. Teachers and peers play crucial roles within this zone by providing the scaffolding necessary for growth. In this framework, relationships are not peripheral to learning - they are central to it.

Vygotsky’s ideas align closely with modern theories of social-emotional learning (SEL), particularly the CASEL framework, which identifies five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Research shows that SEL practices improve academic performance, reduce behavioral issues, and enhance classroom climate (Durlak et al., 2011). This project also draws from culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and trauma-informed education frameworks, both of which emphasize that relationships are key to equity. When teachers intentionally connect with students’ lived experiences and create emotionally safe environments, they affirm students’ identities and foster deeper engagement.

In combining these theories, the *Building Bonds* Toolkit situates learning as a fundamentally social, relational process. It provides teachers with strategies grounded in theory but translated into everyday practices—such as morning meeting structures, student reflection prompts, and peer collaboration routines—that cultivate trust, belonging, and engagement.

Alignment to Program Goals and Professional Standards

This project is designed to align with the learning outcomes of the Western Oregon University Master of Science in Education, Curriculum & Instruction (MSEd C&I) program. The MSEd program emphasizes reflective practice, equity-oriented instruction, research-based decision-making, and professional leadership—all of which are represented in this project.

- *Reflective and Ethical Practice:* The project promotes self-reflection among educators by including journal prompts and evaluation tools that help teachers examine their relational practices and classroom climate.

- *Research-Based Instructional Design:* The toolkit is built from evidence-based research on relationships, SEL, and engagement, translating academic findings into classroom application.
- *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:* By emphasizing culturally responsive relationship-building, the project addresses the MSED program's goal of preparing educators to meet diverse learner needs.
- *Leadership and Collaboration:* The dissemination plan for this project includes sharing the toolkit online through global teacher networks and professional forums, fostering collaboration and leadership in the wider education community.

In addition, the project aligns with national InTASC Teaching Standards, particularly Standard 3 (Learning Environments) and Standard 9 (Professional Learning and Ethical Practice), both of which stress the importance of creating supportive, responsive, and inclusive classrooms.

Project Implementation and Assessment

This professional project takes place over two academic terms, allowing time for research, design, revision, and dissemination. During the initial phase, I reviewed relevant scholarship and analyzed existing SEL and engagement resources to ensure alignment with best practices. The second phase focuses on developing and refining the toolkit itself, integrating feedback from colleagues and professional mentors as the content is created.

The final product, the *Building Bonds* Toolkit, is organized into three major sections:

1. *Teacher–Student Connections*: Strategies for building relationships, student interest surveys, positive communication methods, and daily check-in routines.
2. *Peer Collaboration*: Group work protocols, cooperative learning activities, and tools for promoting positive peer interactions.
3. *Social and Emotional Learning*: Morning meeting guides, emotion-regulation exercises, and reflection templates that embed SEL across subjects.

Upon completion, the toolkit will be shared digitally through a structured online folder that includes downloadable templates, lesson routines, and instructional guides. The materials will be organized to allow educators to easily access and adapt resources for their classroom needs. The primary format will be a downloadable online resource, accessible through an open educational website or digital teaching portfolio. I also plan to disseminate it through educator networks and online teaching communities, such as international teaching forums, LinkedIn professional groups, and teacher resource platforms (e.g., Teachers Pay Teachers or Edutopia’s community channels).

As I begin a teaching abroad program, these online avenues will allow the toolkit to reach a diverse global audience while maintaining accessibility for colleagues and educators in Oregon. Success will be assessed through professional feedback, digital engagement metrics (downloads, comments, or shares), and self-reflection on how the toolkit informs and evolves through my international teaching experience.

Significant and Professional Growth

This project is significant because it translates research into actionable strategies that directly support classroom teachers. Many educators understand the “why” behind

relationship-based teaching but lack the “how.” The *Building Bonds* Toolkit provides the missing bridge—linking theory, practice, and daily classroom realities.

At a broader level, this project contributes to a growing movement in education that prioritizes connection over compliance. It recognizes that engagement is not about controlling behavior but about cultivating curiosity, community, and belonging. By focusing on relationships and SEL, the project aligns with Oregon’s vision of equitable, student-centered learning environments. Professionally, this project represents a key step in my growth as an educator and leader. It demonstrates my ability to integrate research, creativity, and reflection into meaningful professional work. Through this process, I deepen my understanding of how social, emotional, and relational dynamics shape academic success, and I contribute to a culture of care and collaboration within my school community.

As I transition into a teaching abroad program, this project also takes on a global dimension. Sharing the *Building Bonds* Toolkit in international contexts allows me to explore how relationship-centered and SEL-based practices translate across cultures and educational systems. Teaching abroad offers opportunities to both share and learn from diverse approaches to student engagement and community-building; it also encourages reflection on how cultural values shape classroom relationships. This experience will deepen my understanding of how connection and belonging function in different cultural settings—reinforcing the universal importance of relational teaching. By engaging with educators around the world, I can continue refining the toolkit to reflect inclusive, adaptable strategies that support meaningful learning in diverse educational contexts: classrooms where relationship-building remains central regardless of cultural or instructional differences.

Conclusion

Building Bonds: A Relationship-Centered Toolkit for Promoting Engagement and SEL in the Elementary Classroom exemplifies the heart of the MEd program—bridging theory and practice to improve teaching and learning. It emerges from a genuine classroom need, aligns with current educational priorities, and represents a commitment to reflective, equity-driven professional growth. By centering relationships, this project reaffirms the fundamental truth that connection is the foundation of learning—and that when students feel valued, they are far more likely to engage, achieve, and thrive.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction & Guiding Question

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how relationships support academic engagement in upper elementary classrooms, particularly within a Title I context. This review's guiding question: How do teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, and social-emotional learning practices influence academic engagement in elementary school students? This review synthesizes research that explores relational factors affecting engagement and identifies the theoretical and empirical foundations that inform the design of the *Building Bonds* Toolkit, a relationship-centered resource for teachers.

Search Process & Selection Criteria

To conduct this review, I used the following databases through Hamersly Library and Google Scholar: ERIC; JSTOR: Academic Search Premier (EBSCOHost); APA PsycINFO; Google Scholar.

Primary Keyword Search Terms

- “teacher-student relationships AND engagement”
- “peer collaboration elementary school”
- “social emotional learning AND academic outcomes”
- “Vygotsky zone of proximal development classroom”
- “Title I elementary AND engagement”
- “collaborative learning AND motivation”

These searches initially returned over 70 articles, which I narrowed to 34 studies based on the following criteria:

- peer-reviewed

- published between 2000–2025
- focused on K–12 (with preference for elementary settings)
- directly addressed engagement, relationships, SEL, or Vygotskian learning theory

Conceptual Framework

Lev Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory, also known as sociocultural theory, was developed in the early 20th century (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky was responding to dominant behaviorist theories, such as those by B.F. Skinner and John Watson, and the cognitive development model of Jean Piaget. Vygotsky argued that cognitive development is not an isolated, individual process, but instead is deeply rooted in cultural context and social interactions. His work was underappreciated during his lifetime but gained global recognition in the 1960s and 1970s following his death (Daniels, 2001). Vygotsky stated that “learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Emphasis on social collaboration sets apart his theory from other models of learning and makes it a compelling foundation for exploring the role of relationships in academic engagement.

At the center of Vygotsky’s theory are several key concepts that illustrate how social interactions foster cognitive development. A foundational tenet is that social interaction drives learning. Vygotsky said that “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). This highlights the importance of interpersonal interactions when constructing knowledge. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in

collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), is central to his theory of learning. The ZPD highlights the idea that students learn most effectively when they are supported through interaction with teachers or peers who provide guidance, modeling, and feedback. Rather than viewing learning as an isolated individual process, this concept emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning environments where students are challenged but supported. Within classroom settings, relationship-building becomes essential because trust and connection allow students to take academic risks and engage in learning experiences that may initially feel difficult. This perspective reinforces the role of teachers and peer interactions as active contributors to student development and engagement. Vygotsky also emphasized the role of language and cultural tools in shaping cognitive processes, arguing that these tools, when transmitted through social interaction, can influence how individuals think and learn (Daniels, 2001).

Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory is particularly well suited to lead this study on how relationship building affects academic engagement in elementary school Title 1 classrooms. The emphasis on the social nature of learning provides a compelling lens through which to examine the dynamics of student-teacher and peer relationships. When children and peers provide scaffolding and create a supportive social environment, students are significantly more likely to feel motivated and engaged in their academics. As Daniels (2001) notes “the essential Vygotskian insight is that learning is inherently social in nature, occurring within a web of relationships that provide both support and challenge” (p. 40). By fostering strong relationships, educators can create classroom environments where students experience both the emotional safety and the cognitive stimulation that is necessary for both engagement and success. Thus,

Vygotsky's framework not only underscores the importance of relationships in learning, but also aligns with the aims of the study.

Culturally responsive pedagogy further supports the importance of relationship-centered teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasizes that effective instruction acknowledges and values students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and community knowledge as essential components of learning. Culturally responsive teaching encourages educators to build authentic relationships with students, recognize diverse ways of knowing, and create inclusive learning environments that affirm student identity. When teachers intentionally incorporate students' cultural and personal experiences into classroom interactions, students are more likely to feel respected, valued, and engaged in learning. This perspective reinforces the connection between relational teaching practices and student engagement, particularly in diverse classroom settings where students' backgrounds shape how they connect with school and academic content.

This professional project responds to the need for practical, relationship-centered instructional support. The final product of this project is the *Building Bonds* toolkit, a digital, teacher-friendly resource designed to support relationship-building, student engagement, and social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms.

Key Terms

Academic Engagement – understood as cognitive, behavioral, and emotional involvement in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – Vygotsky's term for the space between independent ability and potential growth through social interaction.

Scaffolding – temporary instructional support that enables learners to achieve outcomes they cannot reach alone.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) – as defined by CASEL (2020), SEL is the development of skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and decision-making.

Title I – federally funded schools serving high percentages of low-income students.

Theme 1 - The Power of Student Teacher Relationships

One prominent theme in the literature is the significant impact of positive teacher–student relationships on students’ academic engagement (Davis, 2003; Pianta et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). Research highlights over and over again that students who perceive strong, supportive relationships with their teachers are more motivated to participate actively in academic tasks. For instance, Roorda et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis with 99 studies and found that “positive teacher-student relationships are associated with higher levels of engagement and achievement across grade levels” (p. 499). Similarly, Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) emphasized that “the emotional quality of teacher-student interactions is a key predictor of students’ motivation and engagement” (p. 371). These findings suggest that when teachers build trusting, caring relationships with students, they create an environment where students feel safe to take academic risks and persist through challenges.

Research on elementary classrooms specifically underscores this connection. Hughes and Chen (2011) found that in upper elementary grades, “students who reported close, supportive relationships with their teachers demonstrated greater behavioral engagement and academic motivation” (p. 277). Their study highlights that supportive relationships not only influence cognitive engagement but also foster behaviors like cooperation, persistence, and participation. Also importantly, these findings align with Vygotsky’s idea that learning occurs first through social interactions. Vygotsky (1978) stated that “instruction is only useful when it moves ahead

of development” (p. 89). This emphasizes that teachers’ scaffolding, which is rooted in strong relationships, can extend students’ learning well beyond what they could achieve alone.

Furthermore, positive teacher-student relationships contribute to a classroom environment where students experience both emotional security and cognitive challenge. Davis (2003) observed that “students who feel emotionally supported by their teachers tend to approach academic tasks with greater enthusiasm and persistence” (p. 217), reinforcing the idea that engagement is not solely a cognitive construct but also a social-emotional one. This social-emotional aspect is central to Vygotsky’s model, which emphasizes the role of emotional relationships in cognitive development (Daniels, 2001).

The influence of teacher–student relationships extends beyond immediate academic outcomes, affecting students’ long-term attitudes toward learning and school. Research indicates that supportive teacher relationships contribute to increased engagement, stronger academic persistence, and improved emotional well-being among students (Pianta et al., 2012; Roorda et al., 2011). Relationship-centered classroom environments can also reduce feelings of marginalization and strengthen students’ sense of belonging, particularly for students who face social or environmental challenges (Lozada & Jagers, 2023). These findings suggest that supportive relationships not only enhance engagement but also foster resilience and positive educational trajectories for diverse learners.

Furthermore, the quality of teacher-student interactions plays a crucial role in shaping students’ perceptions of their own abilities. According to Wu et al. (2024), positive teacher-student relationships are linked to increased academic engagement through the mediation of school psychological capital, which includes students’ confidence, optimism, and resilience.

This highlights the importance of teachers fostering not only academic skills but also the psychological resources that underpin students' motivation and engagement.

More recent research reinforces these findings. Kim and Riley (2024) demonstrated that warm, emotionally attuned teacher–student relationships were among the strongest predictors of students' emotional engagement across upper elementary settings. Similarly, Lozada and Jagers (2023) argue that culturally responsive relational practices foster belonging and engagement, particularly among diverse learners. These contemporary studies echo the long-standing findings of Roorda et al. (2011) and Davis (2003), while highlighting the heightened importance of relational safety in post-pandemic classrooms.

In summary, the literature consistently supports the idea that strong teacher-student relationships foster academic engagement, both behaviorally and cognitively. These relationships provide the scaffolding students need to operate within their Zone of Proximal Development, aligning closely with Vygotsky's Social Development Theory. By creating environments rich in trust, support, and challenge, teachers can promote the kinds of social interactions that drive learning and engagement.

Theme 2 - Peer Relationships and Collaborative Learning

Another theme that emerges from the literature is the important role that peer relationships and collaborative learning play in promoting students' academic engagement (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Kindermann, 2007; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Peer interactions within the classroom are not just social experiences; they are integral to the learning processes. Research shows that positive peer relationships can enhance engagement by creating a sense of belonging and encouraging collaborative problem-solving. Wentzel and Watkins (2002) found

that “students who report having supportive peer relationships tend to be more engaged in academic activities and display greater effort in schoolwork” (p. 278). This highlights the importance of fostering a classroom climate that nurtures positive peer interactions and cooperative learning. Gillies (2004) observed that students engaged in cooperative learning activities “demonstrated higher levels of reasoning, critical thinking, and motivation compared to those in traditional classrooms” (p. 39). This aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) ideas that learning is inherently a social process, with cognitive development from interactions with more capable peers. Through collaborative learning, students have opportunities to operate within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

In addition to engagement benefits, collaborative learning structures encourage students to develop essential social-emotional skills. Johnson and Johnson (2009) found that cooperative learning not only improves academic achievement but also enhances interpersonal relationships and social competence. According to their research, “students engaged in cooperative learning develop greater respect and understanding for their peers, leading to a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment” (p. 370). This environment, in turn, nurtures engagement, as students feel valued and connected within their learning communities. The reciprocal nature of these interactions—where engagement fosters better relationships and relationships foster deeper engagement—creates a positive feedback loop that supports academic success.

The role of peer relationships is particularly important in culturally diverse classrooms. Slavin and Cooper (1999) demonstrated that cooperative learning methods are especially effective in promoting engagement and achievement among students from different cultural backgrounds. Their findings suggest that collaborative learning not only enhances academic

outcomes but also builds bridges across cultural divides, contributing to a more cohesive and engaging classroom environment.

Furthermore, recent studies emphasize the long-term benefits of fostering strong peer relationships. Ryan and Patrick (2001) reported that students who experience supportive peer relationships during elementary school are more likely to maintain high levels of engagement in middle and high school. They concluded that “peer relationships play a critical role in sustaining students’ motivation and engagement over time” (p. 438). This highlights the need for educators to prioritize the development of collaborative learning structures that nurture these relationships.

Additionally, evidence suggests that the quality of peer interactions can mitigate the negative effects of other stressors, such as teacher conflict or academic difficulties. Wentzel, Barry, and Caldwell (2004) found that students who had supportive peer networks were better able to cope with negative classroom experiences and maintained higher levels of academic engagement despite challenges. This resilience underscores the protective function of positive peer relationships, further emphasizing the need to cultivate collaborative and inclusive classroom environments where students feel connected and supported.

Recent studies continue to emphasize the importance of peer collaboration in re-engaging students. Janssen, Vasalampi, and Salmela-Aro (2023) found that students who experienced stronger peer belonging demonstrated higher cognitive and emotional engagement during post-pandemic adjustment periods. Additionally, Niemi et al. (2024) observed that structured collaborative routines improved engagement in multilingual elementary classrooms, illustrating that collaborative learning remains effective across cultural contexts—an important consideration as this project will extend to international teaching environments.

Finally, the integration of structured collaborative learning strategies, such as peer tutoring, literature circles, and project-based learning, has been shown to not only increase academic achievement but also foster social and emotional development. According to Webb et al. (2009), when students engage in collaborative discussions and problem-solving activities, they develop communication skills, empathy, and a sense of responsibility toward others' learning. These skills contribute to a more engaging and dynamic classroom environment, in which students feel both accountable for and invested in their academic success. This directly supports Vygotsky's framework, wherein peer interactions and shared problem-solving drive both social and cognitive development.

In summary, the literature provides compelling evidence that peer relationships and collaborative learning are integral to fostering academic engagement. These interactions offer both cognitive scaffolding, as described by Vygotsky, and social-emotional support that motivates students to persist in academic tasks. By creating collaborative learning environments and promoting positive peer relationships, educators can cultivate classrooms where students are not only more engaged but also better prepared to navigate the difficulties of academic and social life.

Theme 3 - Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Academic Engagement

A third theme that emerges from the literature is the pivotal role of social-emotional learning (SEL) in promoting academic engagement. SEL refers to the process by which students develop the skills to recognize and manage emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions ([CASEL], 2020). Numerous studies have demonstrated that SEL interventions contribute not only to students' social and emotional

development but also to their academic engagement and achievement. Durlak et al. (2011) conducted an analysis of 213 studies and found that students participating in SEL programs showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic performance compared to peers who are not in such programs. This highlights the strong connection between emotional well-being and academic engagement.

In elementary classrooms, SEL practices such as morning meetings, emotion check-ins, and reflection activities provide students with structured opportunities to develop social-emotional competencies. These practices foster a sense of safety and belonging, which are critical for engagement. Jones and Bouffard (2012) emphasize that “SEL practices create a foundation for a positive learning environment, which is essential for students to fully engage in academic work” (p. 4). When students feel understood and supported, they are more likely to invest effort in their schoolwork and persist through challenges. This connection aligns with Vygotsky’s theory, as he recognized the integral role of social relationships and affective factors in cognitive development (Daniels, 2001).

Recent research supports the idea that SEL fosters engagement through the development of self-regulation, social awareness, and relationship skills. Zins et al. (2004) argue that these competencies are directly linked to students’ capacity to manage distractions, set goals, and seek help when needed, behaviors that are essential for sustained engagement. They state that “academic success is deeply intertwined with social-emotional competencies that enable students to navigate classroom demands effectively” (p. 4). By embedding SEL into daily classroom routines, teachers create an environment where students develop not only academic skills but also the resilience and interpersonal abilities necessary for long-term engagement. In a study by Oberle et al. (2016), classrooms implementing evidence-based SEL programs experienced

“higher levels of cooperation, empathy, and social engagement among students, which in turn led to greater academic engagement and achievement” (p. 408). This finding suggests that SEL does not operate in isolation; rather, it interacts with peer relationships and teacher-student dynamics to create a well-rounded learning environment led by engagement.

Contemporary research further supports these conclusions. Mahoney and Weissberg (2023) found that SEL implementation played a critical role in students’ engagement recovery following pandemic-related disruptions. Their findings suggest that SEL practices help rebuild classroom routines, strengthen emotional regulation skills, and support students in reconnecting with learning after periods of isolation and instructional interruption. Likewise, Osher et al. (2024) showed that schoolwide SEL practices were particularly effective in Title I contexts, where students often face heightened social and emotional barriers to learning. Their research emphasizes that consistent, schoolwide approaches to SEL can promote both academic engagement and a sense of stability for students experiencing external stressors. These findings reinforce earlier work by Zins et al. (2004) while highlighting the growing urgency of SEL as a driver of engagement in today’s classrooms.

Contemporary research further supports these conclusions. Mahoney and Weissberg (2023) found that SEL implementation played a critical role in students’ engagement recovery following pandemic-related disruptions. Their findings suggest that SEL practices help rebuild classroom routines, strengthen emotional regulation skills, and support students in reconnecting with learning after periods of isolation and instructional interruption. Likewise, Osher et al. (2024) showed that schoolwide SEL practices were particularly effective in Title I contexts, where students often face heightened social and emotional barriers to learning. Their research emphasizes that consistent, schoolwide approaches to SEL can promote both academic

engagement and a sense of stability for students experiencing external stressors. These findings reinforce earlier work by Zins et al. (2004) while highlighting the growing urgency of SEL as a driver of engagement in today's classrooms.

In conclusion, the literature provides evidence that SEL is a key force behind academic engagement, offering students the tools to manage emotions, build relationships, and navigate academic challenges. Through SEL, educators create classroom environments that support both social and cognitive development, aligning closely with Vygotsky's theory that learning is mediated by social interaction and cultural tools. By embedding SEL practices into classroom routines, teachers can cultivate students' engagement and equip them with the skills necessary for academic success and personal growth.

Limitations and Contributions

While the literature on teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and social-emotional learning (SEL) provides compelling evidence for their roles in promoting academic engagement, several theoretical, methodological, and practical limitations emerge across studies. Recognizing these limitations is important to justify the need for research study and to highlight its potential contributions. One theoretical limitation is the tendency of many studies to focus mostly on a single construct (e.g., teacher-student relationships, peer interactions, or SEL) without fully exploring the dynamic between these elements. For example, although Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the interdependence of social relationships and cognitive development, many studies (e.g., Roorda et al., 2011; Wentzel & Watkins, 2002) examine relationships or engagement in isolation, neglecting the complex classroom ecosystem where multiple social and emotional factors interact. This fragmentation limits our understanding of

how combined influences—such as teacher support, peer collaboration, and SEL practices—contribute to sustained engagement. The present study aims to address this gap by adopting a holistic lens that integrates these factors in the context of upper elementary classrooms in a Title I school setting.

In terms of methodological limitations, much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional or correlational designs, which make it difficult to infer causality. Studies such as those by Hughes and Chen (2011) and Zins et al. (2004) provide valuable associations between relationships, SEL, and engagement but do not establish clear cause-and-effect pathways. Additionally, many studies use self-report measures of engagement and relationships, which are susceptible to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the complexity of classroom dynamics (Kindermann, 2007). The present action research study addresses these methodological concerns by employing mixed methods, combining observational data, student self-assessments, and teacher reflections to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of engagement in Title I upper elementary classrooms.

Another limitation concerns sample diversity and generalizations. Many studies in this field have been conducted in homogeneous or high-resource settings, limiting their applicability to diverse classrooms, particularly those serving low-income or culturally and linguistically diverse students. For example, much of the SEL literature (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Oberle et al., 2016) is based on large-scale interventions in well-resourced schools, which may not reflect the unique challenges and strengths of Title I upper elementary classrooms. The present study addresses this gap by focusing on a diverse upper elementary setting in a Title I school, providing insights into how relationship-building and SEL can support engagement in an underrepresented educational context.

From a practical standpoint, while many studies demonstrate the benefits of positive relationships and SEL, few offer concrete, actionable strategies that teachers can implement in their classrooms. For instance, Johnson and Johnson (2009) and Jones and Bouffard (2012) discuss the theoretical underpinnings of collaborative learning and SEL but provide limited guidance on daily practices that integrate these concepts. The present action research study bridges this gap by documenting and reflecting on specific relationship-building and SEL strategies implemented in Title I upper elementary classrooms, offering a practical guide for teachers seeking to enhance student engagement through meaningful interactions and emotional support.

In summary, the literature on relationship-building and academic engagement is robust but marked by theoretical fragmentation, methodological constraints, limited diversity, and a lack of practical strategies. This action research study addresses these limitations by adopting a holistic approach grounded in Vygotsky's theory, employing mixed methods, focusing on a diverse and underrepresented educational setting in Title I upper elementary classrooms, and offering practical, teacher-centered strategies for fostering engagement. Through this work, the study contributes to both the theoretical understanding and practical implementation of relationship-building practices that support academic engagement in upper elementary educational contexts.

Taken together, this literature reveals consistent evidence that relationships are a core driver of engagement, especially in contexts marked by economic inequity, trauma exposure, and post-pandemic learning challenges. Yet the research also shows a lack of practical, teacher-friendly models that integrate relationship-building, SEL, and collaborative learning into everyday instruction. The present professional project responds to this gap by developing the

Building Bonds Toolkit, which translates these research findings into actionable routines, structures, and SEL practices that support engagement in upper elementary Title I classrooms.

Chapter 3: Project Design and Development

Context

Connection is the core of effective teaching. Relationships shape how students engage with learning, interact with peers, and develop a sense of belonging within the classroom. Through my experience teaching fourth grade in a Title I elementary school, I have observed that students' willingness to participate, persist, and take academic risks is closely tied to the strength of their relationships with teachers and classmates. These observations, alongside the growing social-emotional needs present in post-pandemic classrooms, informed the development of the *Building Bonds* toolkit.

This project was created in response to the relational, emotional, and instructional demands present in contemporary elementary settings, where teachers are expected to support academic growth while also addressing students' social-emotional development. The classroom and school context described in Chapter 1 guided the design priorities of this project, particularly the need for strategies that are flexible, realistic, and sustainable within daily instruction.

The sections that follow outline the project's design approach, describe the structure and components of the toolkit, explain the development and revision process, and present the timeline and dissemination plan for the final product.

Project Design Approach

The design of the *Building Bonds* toolkit followed a practitioner-centered approach focused on reflection, responsiveness, and practical classroom application. As a creativity-innovation professional project, the purpose was not to conduct formal research or

measure outcomes, but to intentionally design a resource that supports teachers in strengthening relationships and promoting student engagement within real classroom constraints.

This project was informed by principles of action research, particularly the emphasis on reflective practice and iterative design. Rather than engaging in formal data collection, the development process relied on ongoing reflection, professional judgment, and responsiveness to emerging needs observed in the classroom. This approach allowed the toolkit to evolve organically as ideas were refined, revised, and aligned with both research and instructional realities.

Design decisions were grounded in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which emphasizes the central role of teacher-student relationships, peer collaboration, and social-emotional learning in fostering academic engagement. Theoretical frameworks such as Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2020) guided the structure of the toolkit, reinforcing the perspective that learning develops through social interaction and relational classroom environments. These perspectives informed the selection of strategies that prioritize connection, belonging, and meaningful interaction as foundations for academic success.

A key design priority was usability. Within this project, usability refers to the extent to which teachers can easily understand, implement, and adapt toolkit components within daily classroom routines. The toolkit was intentionally created to be accessible, adaptable, and realistic for classroom teachers. In this context, accessibility refers to clear organization, concise instructions, and low-preparation strategies that allow educators to implement relationship-centered practices without adding significant instructional burden. Strategies were

designed to integrate into existing routines rather than function as add-on programs, recognizing the time constraints educators face. Components were developed to allow flexibility across grade levels, instructional formats, and classroom contexts, including technology-rich and blended learning environments.

Through this design approach, the *Building Bonds* toolkit reflects a balance between theory and practice, offering educators a resource that is research-informed while remaining grounded in the lived experiences of classroom teaching. This balance is important because many research-based strategies fail to translate into classroom practice when they lack clarity, flexibility, or practical application. By intentionally designing strategies that are both theoretically supported and easy to implement, the toolkit helps bridge the gap between educational research and everyday teaching. This approach supports educators in applying relationship-centered practices with confidence and consistency. Ultimately, connecting research to practical classroom use increases the likelihood that teachers will adopt and sustain engagement-focused instructional strategies.

Project Description and Development

The *Building Bonds* toolkit was developed as a practical, relationship-centered resource designed to support student engagement and social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms. The toolkit is organized as a structured digital resource housed within an online folder that contains teacher guides, ready-to-use routines, activity templates, and reflection tools. Materials are designed to be downloadable and adaptable, allowing educators to select and implement strategies that best fit their classroom needs and instructional context. The toolkit is organized around three interconnected areas that emerged from both the literature and classroom

experience: teacher–student connections, peer collaboration, and social-emotional learning practices. These areas reflect research findings that engagement is most strongly supported when students feel known by their teacher, connected to their peers, and equipped with the social-emotional skills necessary to participate fully in learning.

The first component of the toolkit focuses on strengthening teacher–student relationships. This section includes tools such as student interest surveys, daily check-in routines, positive communication strategies, and reflection prompts designed to help teachers better understand students’ identities, emotions, and learning needs. These practices are intended to foster trust, emotional safety, and a sense of belonging, which research identifies as foundational to engagement.

The second component emphasizes peer collaboration and classroom community, including cooperative learning structures, group norms, discussion protocols, and collaborative reflection tools that support positive peer interactions. These strategies are designed to encourage student voice, shared responsibility, and social learning, aligning with sociocultural perspectives that view peer interaction as a central driver of cognitive development. The third component centers on social-emotional learning practices that can be integrated across content areas. This portion of the toolkit includes morning meeting structures, emotion regulation activities, goal-setting templates, and student reflection tools. Rather than isolating SEL instruction, these resources are designed to weave social-emotional development into everyday classroom routines, reinforcing the connection between emotional well-being and academic engagement. Together, these components support classroom environments where students learn through both academic collaboration and emotional skill development, strengthening engagement through relationship-centered practices.

Throughout the development process, attention was given to adaptability and accessibility. All toolkit components were designed to be flexible, allowing teachers to modify routines based on grade level, classroom context, and instructional format. While grounded in research-based practices, the strategies were intentionally written as concise, ready-to-use lessons and routines that teachers can implement immediately with minimal preparation. This approach reflects an understanding of the time constraints educators face and emphasizes practicality alongside theoretical alignment.

By organizing the toolkit around these interconnected domains, *Building Bonds* provides educators with a cohesive framework for promoting engagement through relationships. The structure reflects the theoretical foundations discussed in Chapter 2 while prioritizing ease of implementation within daily classroom routines. Together, these elements support teachers in creating learning environments where connection is both intentional and sustainable, serving as a foundation for student engagement.

Reflection and Revision Process

The development of the *Building Bonds* toolkit was guided by ongoing reflection and revision throughout the design process. As components were drafted, I regularly reflected on their clarity, practicality, and alignment with classroom realities. This reflective practice helped ensure that the strategies remained realistic for daily implementation rather than idealized or overly complex. Informal feedback from fellow educators and professional colleagues also informed revisions. Conversations focused on usability, organization, and relevance to diverse classroom settings. This feedback highlighted the importance of clear directions, flexible implementation options, and concise tools that teachers could easily adapt to their own contexts.

Based on these reflections and professional insights, revisions were made to refine language, streamline routines, and strengthen alignment between toolkit components and the project's relational goals. This iterative process supported the development of a resource that is both research-informed and grounded in practical teaching experience.

Timeline and Organization

The development of the *Building Bonds* toolkit has taken place over the course of two academic terms. This timeline was intentionally structured to allow time for research synthesis, design, reflection, and ongoing revision. During the initial phase, the focus was on reviewing relevant literature and synthesizing research related to teacher-student relationships, peer collaboration, and social-emotional learning. This phase informed the foundational structure and guiding principles of the toolkit. The second phase of the project centers on the continued development and refinement of toolkit components. Core elements of the toolkit have been drafted and organized, with ongoing revisions focused on clarity, coherence, and alignment across components. At the time of submission of Chapters 1–3, the toolkit is largely developed but remains in the final stages of refinement prior to formal sharing and dissemination.

The final phase will involve organizing the completed components into a cohesive digital format and preparing the toolkit for dissemination. Flexibility has been maintained throughout the timeline to accommodate instructional responsibilities and the evolving context of teaching abroad.

Final Project and Dissemination

The final product of this professional project is the *Building Bonds* toolkit, a digital, teacher-friendly resource designed to support relationship-building, student engagement, and social-emotional learning in elementary classrooms. The toolkit includes structured routines, short lesson activities, reflection tools, and adaptable templates intended for immediate classroom use. Materials are organized clearly to allow educators to easily select and implement strategies based on their instructional goals and classroom needs.

The digital format of the toolkit enhances flexibility and ease of implementation. Resources can be used in whole-group, small-group, or individual settings and adapted for in-person, blended, or technology-supported instruction. Materials are organized to support efficient navigation, clear instructional guidance, and adaptable classroom application. This format also allows for continued revision and expansion as the toolkit is used in new teaching contexts.

Dissemination of the *Building Bonds* toolkit will occur through multiple professional avenues. The project will be shared as part of course-based presentations and may be submitted for inclusion in academic or professional showcases. Additionally, the toolkit will be made available through digital platforms such as professional teaching portfolios and educator networks, allowing access for colleagues within Oregon and beyond.

As I transition into international teaching settings, the toolkit will continue to be shared and refined through collaboration with educators in diverse educational contexts. This process will allow me to examine how relationship-centered practices translate across cultures while supporting ongoing professional growth. Sharing the *Building Bonds* toolkit in varied settings

reflects the project's goal of promoting connection, engagement, and belonging in classrooms regardless of geographic or cultural context.

Chapter 4: Project Artifacts

Introduction

This chapter presents selected artifacts from the Building Bonds Toolkit, a digital relationship-centered resource designed to strengthen student engagement through intentional relationship-building and social-emotional practices. The artifacts included here represent key components of the toolkit and demonstrate how research-informed principles were translated into classroom resources. Because the Building Bonds Toolkit contains a comprehensive collection of materials, this chapter does not display every tool created. Instead, it highlights representative examples from each of the toolkit's four primary domains: relationship practices, peer collaboration structures, social-emotional learning supports, and teacher reflection tools.

These artifacts were selected to illustrate the design coherence, adaptability, and usability of the toolkit, as well as its alignment with the guiding question of this project: How can relationship-centered practices increase student engagement in upper elementary classrooms? The sections that follow include visual examples of selected resources accompanied by brief narrative explanations. The visuals serve as primary evidence of the project's design and implementation, while the accompanying narrative clarifies how each artifact reflects the theoretical foundations and practical intentions described in previous chapters.

Relationship Practices

The first set of artifacts represents the relationship practices component of the Building Bonds Toolkit. These tools were designed to help teachers create intentional opportunities for connection between students and their peers, as well as between students and the teacher. The

selected artifacts illustrate how structured relational experiences can be embedded into daily and periodic classroom routines without requiring extensive additional instructional time. Each artifact demonstrates the toolkit’s emphasis on accessibility, adaptability, and purposeful design.

Figure 1: Story of Me Gallery Walk Template

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Classroom Time Capsule

Purpose:

This activity invites students to reflect on their current experiences, hopes, and identities by creating messages to revisit later, helping build a sense of shared journey and connection within the classroom community.

When to Use:

Use at the beginning of the year, midyear, or during a transition period. The capsule can be opened at a meaningful moment such as the end of the year or after a major milestone.

How to Use:

Invite students to write or create messages about who they are right now, including their goals, feelings about school, and hopes for the future. Collect and store the messages in a designated “time capsule” to be revisited later as a shared reflective experience.

Materials:

- Reflection sheet or letter template
- Envelopes or digital folder
- Storage container or labeling folder

Directions:

Introduce the idea of capturing a moment in time and explain that the class will create a time capsule to revisit later. Invite students to reflect on prompts about their experiences, hopes, and identities and create a message to their future selves or to the classroom community. Encourage honesty and reassure students that their reflections are valued. Collect the messages and store them safely until the agreed-upon time. When reopening the capsule, provide time for students to read and reflect on how they have grown and what has changed, and facilitate a conversation about the shared journey of the class.

Why It Matters:

Reflecting on growth over time helps students recognize their development and strengthens their sense of belonging within the classroom. Share the experiences of reflection with

Optional Story of Me Prompts

You can draw, write, or use symbols to represent:

- Things I enjoy doing
- People or communities important to me
- My strengths or talents
- Things I care about
- Something that makes me unique
- Goals or dreams
- What helps me feel supported
- Something I want others to know about me

Reflection:

One thing I hope others learn about me:

As shown in Figure 1, the Story of Me Gallery Walk provides students with a structured opportunity to share aspects of their identities in a creative and reflective format. The template guides students in expressing personal experiences, strengths, and interests while maintaining flexibility for adaptation across grade levels. This artifact represents the toolkit’s focus on belonging and identity affirmation as foundational components of engagement. By offering a

visually clear and teacher-friendly format, the resource reflects the project’s commitment to usability and coherence.

Figure 2: Classroom Time Capsule Reflection Sheet

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Classroom Time Capsule

Purpose:

This activity invites students to reflect on their current experiences, hopes, and identities by creating messages to revisit later, helping build a sense of shared journey and connection within the classroom community.

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Why It Matters:

Reflecting on growth over time helps students recognize their development and strengthens their sense of belonging within the classroom. Sharing the experience of revisiting past reflections fosters empathy, connection, and a collective understanding of how individuals and communities evolve.

Optional Time Capsule Reflection Sheet

Name: _____

Date: _____

Right now, I would describe myself as:

Something I enjoy or care about:

One thing I hope to learn or get better at this year:

How I feel about school right now:

Something I am curious about:

A message to my future self:

Something I want our class to remember:

Figure 2 highlights the Classroom Time Capsule activity, which supports longitudinal reflection and shared classroom growth. The structured prompts encourage students to articulate goals, emotions, and personal insights while participating in a collective experience. This artifact represents how relationship-building can extend over time, reinforcing connection through shared milestones. The design reflects the toolkit’s emphasis on meaningful, developmentally appropriate engagement rather than one-time activities.

Peer Collaboration Structures

The second set of artifacts illustrates the peer collaboration component of the toolkit.

These resources demonstrate how structured interaction can promote both academic engagement and relational trust among students. The selected artifacts emphasize communication, shared responsibility, and collective problem-solving as central to classroom community. Each example reflects the toolkit's integration of sociocultural principles with practical classroom application.

Figure 3: Community Design Challenge Planning Sheet

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Community Design Challenge

Purpose:

This activity invites students to work collaboratively to identify ways to strengthen their classroom or school community and design solutions that promote inclusion, respect, and engagement.

When to Use:

Use during community-building periods, at the beginning or middle of the year, or when students are ready to take ownership of improving their learning environment.

How to Use:

Students work in small groups to identify an area where the classroom community could grow, such as improving collaboration, making classmates feel more included, or creating a more supportive learning environment. Groups brainstorm ideas and develop a plan or proposal for positive change.

Materials:

- Planning template (see below)
- Chart paper or digital workspace
- Writing tools

Directions:

Introduce the idea that communities grow when members work together to improve shared spaces and experiences. Invite students to discuss what helps them feel included and supported at school and what could make the classroom even better. Organize students into small groups and ask them to identify a focus area they would like to improve. Guide groups in brainstorming ideas and developing a simple plan or proposal that describes their solution. Invite groups to share their ideas and reflect on how working together can strengthen the classroom community.

Why It Matters:

Collaborating to improve their environment helps students develop a sense of ownership and responsibility while strengthening relationships through shared goals and collective problem-solving.

Sample Community Design Planning Sheet

Group Members: _____

What is something we want to improve in our classroom or school?

Why is this important?

Our idea or solution:

Steps we could take:

How this will help our community:

One strength each group member brings:

Optional Reflection Prompts:

After presentations:

- What ideas inspired you?
- How did your group work together?
- What did you learn about collaboration?
- How can we continue building a supportive community?

Figure 3 presents the Community Design Challenge planning template, which guides students in collaboratively identifying and addressing areas for classroom growth. The structured format supports shared decision-making while allowing space for creativity and student voice. This artifact represents the toolkit’s commitment to empowering students as contributors to their learning environment. Its organization and clarity reflect intentional design aimed at ease of implementation.

Figure 4: Listening Lab Reflection Sheet

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Listening Lab

Purpose:

This activity helps students develop active listening skills while strengthening empathy and understanding within the classroom community through structured conversations.

When to Use:

Use during community-building periods, when introducing collaboration norms, or when supporting students in developing stronger communication skills.

How to Use:

Students participate in structured partner or small group conversations where one person shares while others listen attentively without interrupting. The focus is on understanding rather than responding.

Materials:

- Conversation prompts (see below)
- Reflection sheet (optional, see below)
- Timer

Directions:

Explain that listening is an important skill that helps build trust and understanding. Invite students to pair up and introduce a conversation prompt. One student shares while the other listens without interrupting, focusing on understanding the speaker’s perspective. After a set time, students switch roles. Encourage listeners to reflect back what they heard or share something they learned about their partner. Conclude with a discussion about how listening can strengthen relationships and support collaboration.

Why It Matters:

When students practice listening with intention, they develop empathy and build stronger peer relationships. Learning to listen deeply supports respectful dialogue and helps create a classroom environment where students feel heard and valued.

Sample Listening Lab Prompts

Choose a prompt:

- Describe a time you felt proud.
- What helps you feel supported at school?
- Share something you enjoy learning about.
- What makes a good friend?
- Talk about a challenge you have overcome.
- What helps you stay motivated?

As shown in Figure 4, the Listening Lab resource provides students with a structured framework for practicing active listening and perspective-taking. The prompts encourage thoughtful reflection and respectful dialogue, reinforcing relational norms within the classroom. This artifact demonstrates how collaboration can be intentionally scaffolded to build

communication skills. The visual layout supports clarity while maintaining flexibility for teacher adaptation.

Social-Emotional Learning Supports

The third set of artifacts represents the social-emotional learning component of the toolkit. These materials focus on helping students build self-awareness, regulation strategies, and resilience within the context of daily classroom experiences. The selected artifacts highlight how SEL practices can be integrated into existing structures rather than taught in isolation. Each example reflects the toolkit’s balance between emotional development and academic engagement.

Figure 5: Emotional Toolkit Builder Template

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Emotional Toolkit Builder

Purpose:

This activity supports students in identifying strategies that help them manage emotions, reduce stress, and maintain focus, promoting self-awareness and emotional regulation.

When to Use:

Use during SEL lessons, after discussing emotions or coping strategies, or when helping students develop tools for managing challenges.

How to Use:

Invite students to reflect on what helps them feel calm, supported, or ready to learn. Students create a personalized “emotional toolkit” that includes strategies they can use during moments of stress or strong emotion.

Materials:

- Toolkit template or reflection sheet
- Writing or drawing materials

Directions:

Explain that everyone has different strategies that help them feel calm or supported and that building an emotional toolkit can help during challenging moments. Invite students to reflect on strategies that work for them and record or illustrate these ideas in their toolkit. Encourage students to think about people, activities, or thoughts that help them feel regulated. Facilitate a discussion about how using these tools can support learning and well-being.

Why It Matters:

When students identify and practice strategies for managing emotions, they develop greater confidence and resilience, supporting both emotional health and engagement in learning.

Sample Emotional Toolkit Reflection

My emotional toolkit includes:

Something that helps me calm down:

Something that helps me focus:

Someone I can ask for support:

A positive thought I can remember:

An activity that helps me feel better:

When I might use these tools:

Figure 5 displays the Emotional Toolkit Builder resource, which guides students in identifying personalized regulation strategies. The template supports reflection while encouraging student ownership of coping tools and support systems. This artifact illustrates the toolkit’s emphasis on empowerment and agency in emotional development. Its design reflects accessibility and adaptability across instructional contexts.

Figure 6: Calm-Corner Co-Design Planning Sheet

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Calm Corner Co-Design

Purpose:

This activity engages students in collaboratively designing a classroom space that supports emotional regulation, reflection, and well-being, helping build ownership and awareness of strategies that support learning.

When to Use:

Use at the beginning of the year, when introducing regulation strategies, or when establishing classroom supports for emotional well-being.

How to Use:

Invite students to brainstorm what helps them feel calm, focused, and supported, and work together to design a calm space that reflects these ideas. Discuss how the space can be used respectfully and intentionally.

Materials:

- Chart paper or shared document
- Planning template
- Writing or drawing materials

Directions:

Introduce the idea that everyone benefits from having strategies and spaces that support emotional balance. Facilitate a discussion about what helps students feel calm and ready to learn. Invite students to brainstorm ideas for what a supportive space might include, such as quiet seating, calming tools, or reflection prompts. Guide students in developing a shared plan for how the space will look and how it will be used respectfully. Reflect together on how having a calming space can support the classroom community.

Why It Matters:

When students help design supports for emotional regulation, they develop greater awareness and ownership of strategies that help them manage emotions, contributing to a classroom environment that promotes well-being and engagement.

Sample Calm Corner Planning Sheet

Designing our Calm Space

What helps me feel calm or focused?

What should be included in our calm space?

How can we use this space respectfully?

When might someone use the calm space?

How does this help our classroom community?

Figure 6 presents the Calm Corner Co-Design planning tool, which supports collaborative development of a regulation space within the classroom. The prompts encourage students to consider how physical environments influence emotional well-being. This artifact demonstrates

how SEL principles can be embedded into classroom structures through shared ownership and intentional design. The clear formatting reinforces the toolkit’s commitment to usability.

Teacher Reflection Tools

The final set of artifacts highlights the teacher reflection component of the Building Bonds Toolkit. These tools were designed to support sustained, intentional implementation of relationship-centered practices. Rather than functioning as isolated activities, the reflection resources encourage ongoing monitoring of engagement patterns and relational dynamics. Each artifact reflects the project’s emphasis on sustainability and professional growth.

Figure 7: Weekly Relationship Reflection Template

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Weekly Relationship Reflection

Purpose:

This reflection tool supports teachers in intentionally monitoring and strengthening relationships with students, helping ensure that all students experience connection and belonging.

When to Use:

Use weekly or biweekly during planning time to reflect on classroom relationships and identify opportunities for growth.

How to Use:

Review the prompts and reflect on recent classroom interactions. Identify patterns, strengths, and areas for intentional connection.

Materials:

- Reflection sheet (see below)
- Planning notebook

Directions:

Set aside time to reflect on classroom interactions and consider which students have experienced positive connection and which may need additional attention. Use the prompts to guide intentional next steps and relationship goals for the coming week.

Why It Matters:

Consistent reflection supports equitable relationship-building and helps teachers respond proactively to student needs.

Weekly Relationship Reflection

This week, I felt most connected to:

A student I would like to connect with more intentionally:

A moment of positive interaction I noticed:

A student who may need additional support:

One relational goal for next week:

As shown in Figure 7, the Weekly Relationship Reflection tool provides structured prompts for monitoring equitable connection with students. The format encourages teachers to identify patterns and set relational goals while maintaining brevity and practicality. This artifact demonstrates how reflective practice can be embedded into planning routines. Its streamlined layout reflects the toolkit’s focus on realistic implementation.

Figure 8: Instruction and Relationship Alignment Audit

Building Bonds Toolkit

Resource: Instruction and Relationship Alignment Audit

Purpose:

This reflection tool helps teachers examine how instructional practices, classroom structures, and relational goals align, supporting intentional decision-making that promotes engagement and belonging.

When to Use:

Use during planning cycles, after completing a unit, or when reflecting on student engagement patterns.

How to Use:

Review recent instructional practices and consider how they supported (or limited) student connection, voice, and engagement. Use prompts to identify alignment between instructional choices and relational intentions.

Materials:

- Reflection template
- Lesson plan or notes

Directions:

Set aside time to review recent lessons or routines. Reflect on how instructional choices may have supported or constrained opportunities for connection and student voice. Consider whether classroom structures allowed for collaboration, relationship-building, and emotional safety. Identify one instructional adjustment that could strengthen relational alignment in future lessons.

Why It Matters:

When instruction and relationships are intentionally aligned, students are more likely to feel supported, engaged, and motivated. Reflective practice helps ensure that classroom structures reinforce — rather than undermine — relational goals.

Alignment Reflection Sheet

Recent lesson or activity:

Did this lesson provide opportunities for:

Student voice? ____

Collaboration? ____

Emotional safety? ____

Choice? ____

What worked well relationally?

Where might relationships have been unintentionally limited?

One instructional adjustment I will try:

Figure 8 presents the Instruction & Relationship Alignment Audit, which guides teachers in examining how instructional structures support or constrain relational goals. The checklist

format promotes critical reflection while remaining accessible and concise. This artifact represents the project's integration of theory and classroom practice. The design underscores the toolkit's intention to align instructional decisions with engagement outcomes.

As shown in Figures 1-8, the above full editable versions of these resources are available through the Building Bonds digital toolkit.

Full toolkit access:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1AacR6pFr4idI1NWB_yse8_zLSi7N-rEL?usp=share_link

Conclusion

The artifacts presented in this chapter demonstrate how the Building Bonds Toolkit translates research-informed principles into structured, accessible classroom practices. Across relationship-building routines, peer collaboration structures, social-emotional supports, and teacher reflection tools, the selected materials reflect intentional alignment with the project's guiding question: how relationship-centered practices can strengthen student engagement in upper elementary classrooms. The visual examples illustrate design coherence, adaptability, and usability, highlighting the toolkit's emphasis on practical implementation rather than theoretical abstraction.

While the artifacts included here represent only a portion of the full toolkit, they provide clear evidence of the project's scope and structure. Each resource reflects the integration of sociocultural theory, social-emotional learning frameworks, and culturally responsive principles discussed in earlier chapters. Collectively, these artifacts demonstrate that relationship-centered practices can be embedded within daily instruction through intentional design. The following

chapter will offer a reflective analysis of the project process, examining growth, challenges, and implications for future implementation.

Chapter 5: The Reflection

Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive reflection on the development of the Building Bonds Toolkit and the professional learning that emerged throughout the process. While the previous chapters outlined the theoretical foundations, design decisions, and representative artifacts of the project, this chapter examines the deeper implications of engaging in the work itself. The purpose of this reflection is not to evaluate outcomes through formal data analysis but to critically assess the growth, challenges, and insights gained through the creation of a relationship-centered professional resource.

Returning to the guiding question of this project—how relationship-centered practices can strengthen student engagement in upper elementary classrooms—this chapter explores the extent to which the toolkit aligns with the original goals established in Chapter 1. It also considers how the process of synthesizing literature, designing practical tools, and engaging in sustained reflection influenced my professional identity as an educator and emerging leader. Through structured reflection aligned with professional standards, this chapter highlights both accomplishments and areas for continued growth.

Reflection on Project Goals and Progress

In Chapter 1, I identified the primary goal of this professional project as the development of a practical, research-informed toolkit designed to strengthen student engagement through intentional relationship-building practices. The intent was to bridge theory and practice by creating structured, adaptable tools that teachers could realistically implement within the

constraints of daily instruction. Reflecting on the completed toolkit, I believe the project met its central objective of translating research into accessible classroom resources. The four domains of the toolkit—relationship practices, peer collaboration, social-emotional supports, and teacher reflection tools—demonstrate coherence and intentional alignment with the guiding question.

One of the most successful aspects of the project was the integration of theory into practical design. Rather than simply referencing research, the toolkit required careful consideration of how sociocultural theory, social-emotional learning frameworks, and culturally responsive pedagogy could be embodied in usable classroom materials. This process strengthened my understanding of how theoretical principles can inform instructional design in meaningful ways. Additionally, organizing the toolkit into clearly defined domains enhanced clarity and usability.

However, the process was not without challenges. Developing resources that were both innovative and practical required multiple revisions and intentional reflection. At times, it was difficult to balance simplicity with depth, ensuring that tools were accessible without oversimplifying complex relational concepts. Time constraints and the absence of full classroom implementation also limited opportunities to refine tools through real-time feedback. Despite these challenges, the project represents significant progress toward the original goals.

Connection to the Literature

Engaging in the design and development of the Building Bonds Toolkit deepened my understanding of the theoretical foundations explored in Chapter 2 and, in many ways, confirmed the central premise of the literature review: student engagement is relational at its core. As I translated research into tangible classroom tools, the work of Vygotsky (1978) and subsequent

sociocultural theorists became less abstract and more instructional. The emphasis on learning as a socially mediated process was not merely a conceptual lens; it became a design principle. Each component of the toolkit required intentional attention to how interactions — between teacher and student, and among peers — shape cognitive and emotional development.

The project strongly reinforced the research on teacher–student relationships as a predictor of engagement. Studies by Roorda et al. (2011), Pianta et al. (2012), and others suggest that students’ perceptions of relational support influence motivation, persistence, and achievement. While these findings were compelling in the literature, the act of designing structured relationship practices made their implications more concrete. I became increasingly aware that relational moments cannot be left to chance; they must be embedded within routines and systems. This realization shifted my thinking from viewing relationships as an interpersonal quality to understanding them as an instructional structure.

Similarly, the literature on social-emotional learning — particularly frameworks articulated by CASEL and researchers such as Durlak et al. (2011) — was both affirmed and complicated through the design process. The research clearly establishes the connection between SEL competencies and academic engagement; however, creating tools that authentically integrate these competencies into daily classroom life proved more nuanced than anticipated. It became evident that effective SEL is not achieved through isolated lessons but through consistent integration across contexts. The toolkit’s SEL supports were therefore designed not as stand-alone activities, but as practices embedded within existing instructional structures, a decision directly informed by the literature.

The project also strengthened my understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy. While the literature emphasizes identity affirmation, belonging, and equity (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Jagers et al., 2018), translating these ideas into practical tools required intentional reflection on accessibility and adaptability. I was challenged to consider how each resource could be modified to reflect diverse cultural contexts and student identities. This process reinforced the idea that relational engagement is inseparable from equity; connection is not neutral. It must be intentional, inclusive, and responsive.

Finally, engaging in this project illuminated a subtle tension within the literature. While research consistently supports the importance of relationships and SEL, schools often operate under structural pressures that prioritize measurable academic outcomes over relational processes. Designing a toolkit that aims to bridge this divide required acknowledging this reality. The literature confirms that engagement and achievement are interconnected, yet implementation requires courage, time, and intentional design. In this way, the project did not merely confirm the literature; it revealed the complexity of enacting it within real-world educational contexts.

Professional Growth as an Educator and Leader

Engaging in the development of the Building Bonds Toolkit required me to examine not only instructional strategies, but also my own beliefs about teaching, leadership, and student engagement. Throughout this process, I became increasingly aware that relationship-building is not an accessory to instruction; it is a foundational stance. Designing structured relational tools forced me to articulate values that had previously operated at an intuitive level. In doing so, I began to see myself not simply as a classroom practitioner, but as an educator capable of designing systems that reflect intentional philosophical commitments.

One of the most significant areas of growth involved my understanding of leadership. Initially, I viewed leadership primarily through formal roles — mentoring, collaboration, or curriculum development. However, the act of creating a toolkit positioned me as a designer of learning environments and relational systems. This shift reframed leadership as influence through design rather than authority. I began to recognize that shaping classroom culture, developing structured tools, and modeling reflective practice are forms of instructional leadership that extend beyond individual lessons. In this way, the project expanded my perception of what it means to lead within educational spaces.

The process also strengthened my confidence in synthesizing research into practice. Prior to this project, academic literature often felt conceptually rich but somewhat removed from the immediacy of classroom life. Translating theoretical frameworks into usable resources required disciplined thinking, revision, and clarity. It demanded that I move beyond agreement with research findings and instead operationalize them. This shift, from understanding theory to enacting it, marked a significant professional milestone. It demonstrated that I am capable not only of consuming research, but of transforming it into practical design.

Additionally, the project heightened my awareness of equity and intentional inclusion. Designing resources that could function across diverse contexts required ongoing reflection about language, accessibility, and adaptability. I found myself repeatedly asking: Who might this tool unintentionally exclude? How might this practice look different in another cultural or linguistic setting? These questions deepened my understanding of culturally responsive practice and reinforced the importance of designing with flexibility in mind. The work required humility; it also required intentionality.

Finally, this project reinforced the importance of reflective practice as a professional habit. Developing teacher reflection tools alongside student-facing resources illuminated the necessity of self-monitoring and growth-oriented thinking. I became more aware of how easily relational intentions can become secondary to instructional urgency if not consciously revisited. The process of building the toolkit mirrored the very reflection practices it promotes. In that sense, the project functioned as both a product and professional mirror. Collectively, the experience strengthened my professional identity as a relationship-centered educator and emerging leader. It affirmed my commitment to designing learning environments where belonging, voice, and engagement are not aspirational ideals but structured realities. At the same time, it reminded me that growth is ongoing. Leadership in education is not static, it evolves through reflection, adaptation, and sustained commitment to students.

Reflection on INTASC/Professional Standards

The development of the Building Bonds Toolkit provided meaningful opportunities to reflect on professional standards and evaluate growth as an educator. In Chapter 1, I identified specific INTASC standards related to learner development, learning environments, instructional practice, and professional responsibility as central to this project. Revisiting those standards in light of the completed work reveals both growth and areas for continued development. The project functioned not only as a resource creation process, but also as a structured lens through which to examine professional identity and instructional alignment.

INTASC Standard 1 emphasizes understanding how learners grow and develop across cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, and physical domains. The process of designing relationship-centered and SEL-integrated tools strengthened my recognition that engagement is

developmental. Students' capacity for collaboration, emotional regulation, and reflection does not emerge automatically; it must be scaffolded intentionally. Creating structured supports such as the Emotional Toolkit Builder and Stress Mapping activity reinforced the importance of meeting students where they are developmentally. This project deepened my understanding that relational safety and emotional awareness are prerequisites for academic risk-taking. Growth in this area reflects a more holistic view of learner development.

INTASC Standard 2 highlights the need to understand individual differences and create inclusive learning environments. Throughout the design process, I was consistently challenged to consider adaptability and accessibility. Each resource was intentionally structured to allow modification for multilingual learners, diverse cultural contexts, and varied emotional needs. While no toolkit can fully anticipate every classroom scenario, this project strengthened my ability to design with flexibility in mind. I became more attentive to language clarity, student choice, and multiple modes of participation. This growth reflects a more intentional approach to inclusion rather than reliance on reactive accommodation.

INTASC Standard 3 focuses on creating environments that support collaborative learning and positive social interaction. This standard is perhaps the most directly aligned with the goals of the project. Through the development of peer collaboration structures and classroom climate reflection tools, I gained a deeper appreciation for how environments are shaped by routines and systems. Engagement is not simply influenced by teacher disposition; it is structured through intentional design. The Calm Corner Co-Design and Community Design Challenge exemplify this shift in thinking that environments can be co-constructed, not merely managed. This insight reflects significant growth in my understanding of classroom culture as a designed space.

INTASC Standard 8 addresses the use of instructional strategies that encourage critical thinking, collaboration, and active engagement. Designing resources that integrate relational practices with instructional structures required me to think more intentionally about alignment. I became increasingly aware that instruction and relationships cannot function in isolation. The Instruction & Relationship Alignment Audit emerged directly from this realization. Rather than treating engagement as a byproduct of good lessons, I now view it as the result of deliberate integration between instructional planning and relational intention. This represents a meaningful evolution in my instructional philosophy.

INTASC Standard 9 emphasizes ongoing professional growth and reflective practice. The creation of teacher reflection tools within the toolkit mirrored my own professional development throughout this process. I was required to engage in sustained self-assessment, revision, and refinement — often confronting areas of uncertainty or tension between ideals and practicality. This project reinforced the importance of structured reflection as a professional habit rather than an occasional exercise. Growth in this area is evident not only in the toolkit itself, but in my increased confidence in engaging critically with my own instructional decisions.

INTASC Standard 10 addresses leadership and collaboration within educational communities. While this project was an individual graduate requirement, its implications extend beyond personal development. Designing a toolkit that could be shared with colleagues required me to consider clarity, coherence, and professional communication. I began to see curriculum design and resource development as forms of collaborative leadership. Leadership, in this sense, is not positional; it is relational and influence-based. This project expanded my understanding of how educators can lead through thoughtful design and shared practice.

Collectively, reflecting on the INTASC standards highlights the multidimensional growth fostered through this project. The Building Bonds Toolkit represents more than a compilation of classroom resources; it reflects a developmental shift in how I conceptualize engagement, environment, and professional responsibility. While growth is ongoing, the intentional alignment between theory, design, and standards demonstrates meaningful progress toward becoming a reflective, relationship-centered educator.

Limitations of the Project

While the Building Bonds Toolkit represents a comprehensive and intentional effort to translate research into practice, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this project was developed as a design-based professional resource rather than an empirical research study. As a result, the toolkit was not implemented in a sustained, data-driven classroom context during the timeframe of this project. Although the resources are grounded in established literature and professional experience, their long-term impact on student engagement has not been formally measured. This limitation reflects the scope of a Creativity–Innovation professional project rather than a controlled research investigation.

Time constraints also shaped the development process. The creation of a cohesive, multi-domain toolkit required substantial drafting, revising, and alignment across sections. While considerable attention was given to coherence and usability, additional time would have allowed for expanded piloting, peer feedback, and refinement. In particular, implementation across varied grade levels or educational settings may reveal opportunities for further adaptation. The limited timeframe required prioritizing foundational components over extended field testing.

Another limitation involves contextual specificity. The toolkit was designed with upper elementary classrooms in mind, informed by my own teaching background and professional experiences. Although the tools were intentionally created to be adaptable, they inevitably reflect assumptions shaped by a particular educational context. Classrooms operating under significantly different cultural, linguistic, or institutional structures may require modification beyond what is outlined within the toolkit. Recognizing this limitation reinforces the importance of flexible design and ongoing refinement.

Additionally, the absence of direct student or teacher implementation during the formal project period limited opportunities for immediate feedback. While the tools were informed by classroom experience and professional reflection, structured evaluation from diverse users would strengthen the toolkit's responsiveness and effectiveness. Future iterations could incorporate educator feedback surveys, collaborative revision cycles, or small-scale pilot implementations to enhance usability and contextual responsiveness.

Finally, the scope of the project required balancing depth with practicality. Relationship-centered teaching is a complex and nuanced endeavor, influenced by systemic factors such as curriculum pacing, institutional expectations, and policy pressures. While the toolkit offers structured supports, it cannot fully address broader systemic challenges that shape classroom environments. This limitation highlights the reality that relational engagement is influenced not only by teacher practice, but also by larger educational systems.

Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the value of the project; rather, it situates the toolkit within a realistic professional context. The Building Bonds Toolkit represents a thoughtfully designed starting point — one that invites continued growth, adaptation, and

refinement. Recognizing areas for expansion provides a foundation for future development rather than signaling deficiency.

What I Would Do Differently

Reflecting on the development process of the Building Bonds Toolkit reveals several areas where adjustments could strengthen future iterations of the project. While the foundational structure is coherent and aligned with research, the experience of designing a comprehensive professional resource illuminated opportunities for refinement. If given the opportunity to revise or extend this work under different circumstances, I would approach several elements with greater intentional layering and expanded collaboration.

First, I would incorporate structured pilot implementation earlier in the design process. Although the toolkit was informed by classroom experience and professional reflection, embedding short cycles of real-time implementation and feedback would enhance responsiveness. Even small-scale classroom trials could provide insight into pacing, clarity of directions, and student reception. Observing how students interact with the tools and how teachers navigate their use would allow for iterative refinement grounded in lived classroom dynamics. Future revisions could benefit from this cycle of design, implementation, reflection, and revision.

Second, I would expand the cultural responsiveness dimension of the toolkit in more explicit ways. While adaptability was a guiding design principle, future development could include annotated guidance that offers examples of how specific tools might be adapted across cultural, linguistic, or international contexts. Including reflective prompts for teachers about cultural assumptions embedded within activities could further strengthen the equity focus. This

would deepen alignment between relational engagement and inclusive practice, ensuring that the toolkit not only promotes connection but does so in culturally sustaining ways.

Additionally, I would strengthen the integration between the four toolkit domains. Although the sections are intentionally organized for clarity — relationship practices, peer collaboration, SEL supports, and teacher reflection — future iterations could include cross-referenced pathways that show how tools interact across domains. For example, pairing a peer collaboration activity with a specific teacher reflection prompt or linking an SEL practice to an engagement observation tool would highlight systemic coherence. This layering would further emphasize that engagement is not built through isolated strategies, but through aligned structures.

Finally, I would seek collaborative feedback from colleagues across diverse educational settings. Engaging educators in dialogue about clarity, practicality, and relevance would not only strengthen the toolkit but also position it as a shared professional resource rather than an individual project. Collaboration would deepen the toolkit's applicability and reflect the relational values it promotes. Educational design benefits from multiple perspectives; incorporating them would expand both quality and reach.

Overall, reflecting on what I would do differently highlights a shift in perspective from completion to iteration. The toolkit is not a static product, it is a living resource that can evolve alongside professional growth and contextual change. Recognizing opportunities for expansion reflects an understanding that educational innovation is ongoing. Improvement is not evidence of inadequacy; it is evidence of commitment.

Future Directions

The completion of the Building Bonds Toolkit marks not an endpoint, but the beginning of continued professional inquiry. The process of designing this resource has reinforced my commitment to relationship-centered teaching and strengthened my desire to refine and expand the work in authentic classroom contexts. Moving forward, I intend to implement components of the toolkit within my own teaching practice, observing how structured relational supports influence classroom engagement and community development over time. Implementation will provide opportunities to revisit and revise tools based on lived experience, allowing the resource to evolve responsively.

Teaching in diverse and international contexts presents a particularly meaningful avenue for expansion. Because the toolkit was intentionally designed with adaptability in mind, applying its principles across cultural and educational systems will offer valuable insight into how relationship-centered practices translate globally. This work invites reflection on how belonging, collaboration, and social-emotional learning manifest across contexts. Engaging with educators in different settings may also surface new perspectives that strengthen the toolkit's cultural responsiveness and inclusivity. In this way, the project holds potential not only for classroom impact, but for broader professional dialogue.

Future development may also include collaborative refinement with colleagues. Sharing the toolkit within professional learning communities could generate feedback that enhances clarity, practicality, and relevance. Structured dialogue around implementation challenges and successes would support iterative improvement. Additionally, the toolkit could serve as a foundation for professional development workshops focused on relational engagement. Framing the work as a shared professional resource rather than an individual product aligns with the collaborative spirit emphasized throughout the project.

There is also potential for future research-informed expansion. While this project did not include formal data collection, subsequent iterations could incorporate action research cycles or engagement metrics to explore the toolkit's influence more systematically. Documenting patterns of student participation, classroom climate shifts, or teacher reflection outcomes would deepen understanding of relational engagement in practice. Such inquiry would extend the work from design innovation into evidence-informed refinement.

Finally, this project has clarified my professional direction. I see relationship-centered engagement not as a temporary focus, but as a sustained area of professional commitment. The work affirms that academic growth and relational safety are inseparable; one strengthens the other. Continuing to develop resources, engage in reflective practice, and contribute to conversations about engagement represents a meaningful trajectory for my future career. The Building Bonds Toolkit serves as both a product of this graduate journey and a foundation for ongoing professional exploration.

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