

2020

## Portrait Narratives of Caring Teachers for African American High School Students

Larissa T. McCormick  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Larissa Trenette McCormick

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Portrait Narratives of Caring Teachers for African American High School Students

by

Larissa Trenette McCormick

MPhil, Walden University, 2020

MEd, Indiana Wesleyan University, 1996

BA, Marian College, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education – Self-Design

Walden University

August 2020

## Abstract

For African American high school students, caring relationships extend beyond peer interaction to include supporting adults, most particularly teachers, who are pivotal to their educational experience and success or lack of success. The research problem centered on the lack of diversity and authentic voice when discussing caring teacher-student relationships. Markedly, the voices of African American high school students were lacking from the current body of research literature. The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was threefold: (a) to capture the voices of African American high school students' as they shared their experience(s) about a caring teacher; (b) to capture the voices of their supporting adults, administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher; and (c) to analyze their responses to ascertain what defined a caring teacher for these persons. The conceptual framework was Noddings' ethics of care theory and served as the nexus for the central research question. A purposive sample of 5 students and 10 adult participants contributed their stories through semistructured interviews. The methodological approach was narrative inquiry, and portraiture was the style used to report the stories. Data analysis used thematic coding and triangulation across participants and groups. The initial findings and cross-group interpretive analysis showed that what defined a caring teacher for African American students was similar for their supporting adults. The implications for social change include legitimating African American high school students' voices; improving teacher-student caring relationships and educational experiences, leading to overall academic success; recommendations for including care and cultural training for preservice and practicing educators; and policy reform.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manifestation of my doctoral program work to those persons who have directly influenced my life in a magnificent way. These persons have contributed in diverse ways; yet, each way has held significance and meaning beyond measure.

My dearest Mommy, Laura, your belief in me/my—God-given gifts, talents, skills, abilities, personality, insights, compassions; worth as an individual, artist, and educator; and as your daughter—has guided me from one venture, opportunity, pursuit, and calling to the next one. Your continuous support, whether spoken or merely felt, of all my efforts has propelled me to exist and become, to pursue and achieve, and to know and believe in opposition to what others would have deemed “impossible” and “out of reach.” Your faith in God and personal resolve for others above self on a daily basis as expressed in John 15:13 “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (, family, and foes {those who self-proclaim to be because of malice}) has empowered and molded me into the African American woman that I am presently and will be in the future. You have taught me to be proud of my heritage even when others would say or demonstrate otherwise. My love for you runs as deep as the root of my being. For all these reasons and more, I call you eternally Mother, Best Friend, and Love, and I dedicate this work that serves as a catalyst for positive social change to you.

To my students—past, present, and future—you have inspired me to pick-up the mantle and forge boldly into the future because you deserve educators who care wholeheartedly for you as an individual human being and a student. Your voices will be heard.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In this study, I explored the caring relationship between African American high school students and their teacher. Care/caring in relationships should be natural and mutual, based upon the traditional and classical viewpoint (respective of a mother's love for a child) of relational interactions between people, animals, and things (Noddings, 2007). However, the relationship between a teacher and any high school student is not commonly natural or mutual, including between teachers and African American high school students. Many times, when a student enters into the traditional education system, they are "taught" to see the teacher as the leader or head of the class/classroom and/or as the wise sage and giver of knowledge. Conversely, the student is taught to see themselves as the follower and the recipient of knowledge. From this perception, it is more difficult to develop a natural or mutual teacher and student relationship. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to ascertain what defined a caring teacher according to the experiences of African American high school students and their supporting adults, administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher. The rationale for such an exploration lay in the numerous measures in the field of education pertaining to academic performance and aptitude that have denoted disparities and disproportionalities amongst African American high school students and their other ethnic and racial peers.

In the United States of America, African American high school students graduated at a rate that was disproportionately low compared to that of other racial and ethnic groups. The African American/Black and White high school graduation

disproportionality rates are among the most noted in scholarly research. The adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) in 2017-2018 for Black (a racial/ethnic minority population) public high school students was 79% and for White (a racial/ethnic nonminority population) high school students was 89%; this was a 10% difference between Black and White high school students (Hussar et al., 2020). Asian and Pacific Islander (a racial/ethnic minority population) public high school students had an ACGR of 92%, which was the highest ACGR in 2017-2018 for all public high school racial/ethnic group students; this was a 13% difference between Black and Asian and Pacific Islander (Hussar et al., 2020). Twenty-one out of every 100 African American students left high school before ever receiving a high school diploma, which has long been considered equivalent to a “golden” ticket in this country. Only 79 out of 100 African American high school students reached this significant U.S. educational milestone in 2017-2018. For many members of society, including educators and policy makers, this 10% (compared to a nonminority racial/ethnic student group) and 13% (compared to a different minority racial/ethnic student group) difference should not exist and have the impact that it does for African American/Black high school students. Consequently, the negative effects are endemic to the success of African Americans during and following high school.

According to Boddie, Kyere, and Adedoyin (2019), African American youth also “have lowest scores and grades, high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and low enrollment in postsecondary education” (p. 187). Based upon this research, it could be deduced that some variable(s)—person, instructional methods or approach, educational



environment, and/or relationship (interaction) with a teacher—was at the root of this stark difference in graduation rates for African American and White students, and that understanding the root of the cause was needed in order to bring about positive change and lessened disparities. As a consequence of these high school graduation rates, African American high school students were reaping benefits, including matriculation into and graduation from postsecondary educational institutions, at lower rates than White high school students. Thomas Jefferson penned, “that all men are created equal” in *U.S. Declaration of Independence* (1776). However, any person, including those noting the disparities that exist between African American and White high school students, could question how this ideal has been realized considering these comparisons. Furthermore, it should be asked, “What is truly at the root of this massive problem?”

### **Background**

The experiences and outcomes of high school students in America differ from student to student. These differences include a range of factors, such as lack of belonging and/or connection to school; feeling disliked or lesser-than their (other racial/ethnic) counterparts; unfair and/or different treatment, including discipline; and lack of caring (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). Many times, these differences in student experiences and outcomes fall along racial/ethnic dividing lines, specifically African American and White, as shown in a study conducted by Pena-Shaff, Bessette-Symons, Tate, and Fingerhut (2019). Each of these factors had significance to the high school students both within and outside the classroom environment. These factors tended to extend to the school culture, the whole-school environment, and the home environment.

American racial/ethnic minorities and more specifically African Americans represent the high school student populations whose experiences were more inclined toward negative outcomes, commonly referred to as “gaps.”

More quantitative than qualitative studies constitute the current body of research literature representing achievement and gaps for African American high school students. Research studies, primarily quantitative, have been investigations of the “achievement gap” and dropout rates amongst African American high school students and their other racial/ethnic counterparts (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; McFarland, Cui, Rathbun, & Holmes, 2018). Quantitative research studies have also identified similar factors that adversely affect academic success for African American high school students in response to the educational disparity and marginalization of African American high school students (Hussar et al., 2020; McMillian, Carr, Hodnett, & Campbell, 2016). Fewer research studies have investigated other considerations, such as caring teachers, a consideration that represented a gap in the research literature. Consequently, the need for an exploration such as this study was reinforced by prior research.

Research studies have focused on African American high school students but have rarely included their perspective. In fact, those research studies that investigated factors such as those previously mentioned more frequently included the perspective(s) of Mexican American, Latinx, European American, and Asian American high school students but very seldom the perspective(s) of African American high school students, another significant gap in the research literature (Cauley, Immekus, & Pössel, 2017; Cavanagh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014; Murillo & Schall, 2016; Uy, 2018). For this reason,

the perspective(s) of African American high school students needed to be legitimized. Their voices needed a forum in which to be heard by others. When their voices were heard, the hope was that effective initiatives for change would be implemented; hence, the need for this study.

One of the most important reasons why this study needed to be conducted was because in the research literature the voices of African American high school students were limited almost to the point of being silent. These students' voices remained largely unheard, with their stories only partially voiced in Marcucci (2020) regarding drop-out rates and suspensions. In Trask-Tate, Cunningham, and Francois (2014), the voices of these students were not holistically presented with regard to their perceived school experience and relationship with teachers. To these points, numbers in the form of statistics were the dominant reflections (representation) of the African American students' experience. Because of this, it was important that the authentic voices of the African American high school students were heard and became a part of the research literature. For this important reason, it was my intention to listen to and record the lived experiences of African American high school students and the supporting adults in their life to ascertain what they defined as a caring teacher.

Caring is an aspect of education both worthy and necessary of inclusion and representation as it pertains to African American students. Based on the research literature, the voices of African American high school students were not included in the research studies that investigated the factor of care in schools (Noddings, 2003). For this study, I developed a narrative by African American students and their supporting adults

that would be the basis of a model for a caring teacher of African American students. This prototype could then serve as a model for all educators, including teachers, to employ in order to improve and enhance their teacher-student relationships. The audience for whom the study held importance was threefold—African American high school students, educators (teachers and other education professionals), and social scientists.

African American high school students wanted their voices to be heard, as would any other racial or ethnic group of high school students, and to be seen as important in society. This study held importance for African American high school students because this group has experienced and continues to experience marginalization, minoritization, and racialization with respect to academic achievement, academic performance, and dropout rates (Cavanagh, 2009). The research literature identified teacher-student relationships as a major factor in influencing the areas of marginalization, minoritization, and racialization. Noddings' (2003), a pioneer in the areas of education and sociology and was the originator of the theory of the ethics of care, a seminal work that provided an appropriate framework through which to explore and understand the phenomenon of relationships with teachers experienced by African American high school students. This study was important for teachers and other education professionals who represent a vital link between African American high school students and academic success. Lastly, this study held importance for social scientists because few researchers have explored the barriers to the academic success of African American high school students from the students' perspectives. Therefore, this study filled a gap in the research literature.

### **Problem Statement**

Research has been conducted on the root of this problem for Latinx/Hispanic high school students. Research with Latinx/Hispanic high school students regarding disparities in achievement and discipline identified that a primary problem was a lack of caring for these students as culturally located individuals (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Valenzuela, 1999). In this research, some connections could be made between lack of care and educational disparities, but those connections could not be predicated. However, the Latinx/Hispanic high school student population did not represent the African American high school student population, and the Latinx/Hispanic high school student experience did not denote the African American high school student experience. Factors that affected the students and effected the disparities in achievement and discipline were not the same for Latinx/Hispanic and African American high school students. To address this gap, a narrative study based on what constituted a caring teacher for African American high school students was needed to add to the current body of literature.

Studies that focused on Latinx/Hispanic high school students' achievement and discipline were not definite predictors of African American high school students' outcomes. These studies were based on the assumption that the same disparities also existed for African American high school students (Gregory et al., 2010). Rather than make presumptions, associations, and hypotheses, research was needed to capture the voice of the specific student population of concern, African American high school students. The experience and voice of African American high school students was

needed to ascertain their perspective(s) on caring relationships in the high school environment. Capturing the voices of African American high school students may allow these students to “teach” others—educators, students, racial and nonracial peers, parent/guardian(s), and other interested persons—about their educational experiences, especially as they pertained to teacher-student relationships. Through teaching these individuals, the potential was created to improve instructional, curricular, cultural, school climate, and relational practices in the schools. Furthermore, as an outcome of African American students’ sharing their voices, current and future questions could be presented that would generate further inquiry, exploration, and research that could capture the relational connections of African American high school students’ with teachers.

A possible cause for the educational disparities could lie in the type or nature of the relationship that exists between African American high school students and their teachers. Researchers in this area investigated the relationships and interaction between teachers and indigenous or aboriginal high school students, specifically in Saskatchewan, Canada (Stelmach, Kovach, & Steeves, 2017). Another researcher explored the same phenomenon with regard to Latinx/Hispanic high school students (Newcomer, 2018), and one researcher discussed this topic with multiracial K-12 students (Ginsberg, 2017). However, there was a void in the research regarding caring by high school teachers as it related to African American high school students. Therefore, this study explored the relationships and interactions of teachers and African American high school students. Furthermore, through the use of narratives, this study described what constituted a caring teacher for African American high school students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to inform and enhance the body of literature concerning African American high school students and their caring relationships with teachers. In view of my intentions for the study, those for whom this study is important include the following individuals and groups: African American high school students and their families; high school teachers; high school administrators; and educational professional arenas (higher education teacher education programs) and professionals, including education undergraduate and graduate students. On a secondary level, those for whom this study has significance includes school boards and education policymakers. Most importantly, the purpose of the study was to affect positive social change.

In this study, I proposed to effect positive social change by legitimizing the voices of African American high school students, explicitly those attending high schools located in the Midwest. One other current study explored the experiences of African American high school students and their perspective(s) on the relationships that they had with teachers, but this research neither employed the narrative approach nor emphasized the conceptual framework of caring (Boston & Warren, 2017). As a consequence of conducting this narrative study and reporting the findings, I aimed to (a) improve teacher-student relationships for African American high school students; (b) promote awareness to all involved entities of the disparities that exist within the African American high school student's experience; and (c) raise consciousness of stakeholders regarding factors that influence and impede African American high school students' academic achievement and graduation rates, statewide and nationally. I also intended with the study to inform

constituents (a) what defined a caring teacher on the high school level for African American students; (b) how to apply what defined a caring teacher to other educational levels; and (c) how to promote teacher practices in high schools that are consistent with the findings for addressing, instructing, interacting with, and caring for African American students (within their respective institutions). Ultimately, the findings could be used as basis for (a) creating professional development training within and outside of educational institution settings; (b) the evaluation and observation of teachers inside and outside of the classroom setting; and (c) teacher education programs and courses at the postsecondary, preservice, and beginning teacher training levels.

### **Research Question**

In alignment with the research problem and purpose of the study, one broad open-ended research question was posed in order to focus the study and at the same time remain open to what would emerge from the data (see Bogden & Biklen, 2007). As the data were being collected and analyzed, the research question could be refined and modified, and an additional question posed that would be more suitable for how the study was framed by the data.

### **Central Question**

RQ: What are the narratives of experiences of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

This research question reflected the essence of the central phenomenon explored in the study and provided a sense of direction for ascertaining the perspectives of African



American high school students and their supporting adults with respect to a caring teacher. However, the conceptual framework of Noddings' (2003) ethics of care further provided a basis for exploring and understanding the phenomenon through data collection and analysis.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For this qualitative study, I applied Noddings' (2003) theory of an ethics of care to a specific subset of students (African American) in a particular educational setting (high school). Ethics of care is a theory that resulted from the teachings and writings of Kohlberg (1984), a developmental psychologist. Ethics of care/ethics of caring is a set of principles that Noddings (2003) formulated into a theory to guide educators in the application of caring in the classroom. Kohlberg's theory of moral development comprised six stages. The six stages were based on research and addressed how human beings develop ethically throughout childhood. Kohlberg's stages were as follows: (a) Stage 1, Obedience and Punishment; (b) Stage 2, Individualism and Exchange; (c) Stage 3, Interpersonal Relationships; (d) Stage 4, Maintaining Social Order; (e) Stage 5, Social Contract and Individual Rights; and (f) Stage 6, Universal Principles.

A few psychologists and other social scientists, including educationalists, took the work of Kohlberg and developed additional theories (Gibbs, 2019; Siegler et al., 2017; Sinnott, 1998). These theories were based on Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development. Noddings (2013a) was one such social scientist and educationalist who applied Kohlberg's theory of moral development to the discipline of education. Noddings (1984, 2013a, & 2013b) offered education practitioners and social scientists a

lens through which to apply and view education and morality. One result of Noddings' (2013a) theorizing/work was categorized as moral education. Noddings' (1984) theory of ethics of care had direct relation elations to moral education and other movements and ideologies.

The theory of ethics of care had a foundation within both feminism (feminist theory) and schooling and education—all related aspects. Noddings' (1984) “ethic of caring[/care]” embodied two aspects, the ““one-caring’ . . . and the ‘cared-for’” (p. 4). The one-caring was often the person who was in the position of giving for another. The one being cared-for was often the person (and/or animal or thing) in the position to receive the care from another. The ethics of care involved an interchange between at least two persons, animals, or a person and a thing, which was usually animate. Due to the theory's emphasis upon caring, many persons, including Noddings (1984), had associated the concept of caring with the feminine, mother, and mothering. The connection between caring and mothering provided a more viable application within the field of education. More specifically, the ethics of care applied to education emphasized relationships.

One significant relationship that developed in the school setting was the relationship between a teacher and a student. During both the 20th and 21st centuries, Noddings' (1984, 2003, 2013a, & 2013b) work as a social scientist, educational philosopher, and theorist took the theory of ethics of care and applied it to schooling, education, and relationships. Noddings' (1984, 2002, 2013a, & 2013b) application included teaching and learning; the field of education; and how people interact with and

act around other people, their environment, and in society in large. In these contexts, each application was considered from a moral and ethical perspective.

Caring is a natural emotion and act exhibited by and between human beings.

Caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's. . . . [W]e consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. . . . [We care because of] the other's wants and desires and with the objective elements of his problematic situation [whether we deem it as such or not]. (Noddings, 1984, p. 24)

Noddings (1984 & 2013a) purported that care was a critical feature in education and established a new perspective concerning care in education. It is only natural that through the processes of education that a teacher and a student might begin to care for and about one another. I believed that the theory of ethics of care was the conceptual framework best suited to address the research problem of my dissertation and serve as a lens through which data was collected and analyzed in this study.

African American high school students face many circumstances that threaten to undermine their prospects for present and future educational and noneducational opportunities. Currently in the United States, African American high school students academically underperformed their White and other ethnic group counterparts (Santelices & Wilson, 2015). Myriad theories and arguments exist to understand, justify, explain, eradicate, and lessen the disparity between African American and White and other ethnically diverse high school students. Many people, including education professionals, parents, and policy makers, believe that "all children can learn." These persons must

consider that not “all children learn” in the same manner. However, numerous factors—theories, conjectures, concepts, suppositions, hypotheses, policies, and practices—aided in creating this disparity between African American and White high school students. These factors include but are not limited to distributive justice, zero tolerance, discipline gap, and cultural gap.

The theory of ethics of care was a viable framework with which to explore the disparities that exist between African American and White high school students. Noddings (1984) suggested that the ethics of care fosters an environment in which persons could come to know and understand the feelings of another. In the process of coming to know and understand the feelings of another, a certain type of reciprocal relationship could be formed between those individuals. Additionally, the application of ethics of care in schools is not only relevant to increasing African American high school student achievement, but it also is relevant to relationships. The ethics of care could be instrumental in improving and building relationships in schools for the betterment of the students, teachers, parent/guardian(s), and principal. In forming relationships based on genuine care in the high school environment, African American students might begin to work through past concerns and barriers impeding their success.

The one “cared-for” and the “one caring” denote the roles in the theory of ethics of care. According to Noddings (1984), each role carried with it both a moral and ethical responsibility. At any given time, the students, teachers, parent/guardian(s), and principal could function in the role of the one-caring and the cared-for. Nonetheless, each relationship’s success or failure was dependent on if and how each person in their given

“care” role chooses to carry out their responsibility ethically or morally. Using ethics of care as a conceptual framework, I was able to better ascertain whether the research participants—African American high school students, their teachers, their parent/guardian(s), and their administrators—describe a “best teacher” who operates within the theory of ethics of care.

### **Nature of the Study**

The research approach for this study was qualitative with a narrative research design. The narrative research design served as a means of data collection or what Patton (2014) identified as “central questions”: “What does this narrative or story reveal about the person [or persons] and the world from which it came” (p. 133)? For the present research study, the students and their supporting adults were able to give a voice to their stories. These participants were offered the opportunity to share their stories and have them recorded for the purpose of positive social change and the empowerment of themselves and others. These stories add a unique thread to the tapestry of qualitative and narrative research. I hope that the collection of these shared stories positively informs students, teachers and other education professionals; parent/guardian(s); and policy makers as to the experiences of African American high school students.

The narrative approach was an appropriate methodology for the purpose of this study. According to Creswell (2013), narrative research could be analytically applied in various fields for many purposes. For the purpose of this study, the narrative approach was the best medium to capture the authentic voices of the research participants, the administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students. Through the sharing of their

stories, I served as a nonintrusive researcher who recorded and retold the stories that unfolded from the voices of the participants. For these reasons, narrative inquiry was the most judicious qualitative approach to adequately and honestly tell someone's story.

More specifically, I employed the narrative style of portraiture. I choose portraiture because it has a "focus on narrative, . . . uses metaphor and symbol, . . . [and] intends to address wider, more eclectic audiences. . . . [It] develop[s] texts that [spur] thinking more deeply about issues that concern them" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 10). Through the narrative style of portraiture, I documented the life stories of African American students' experiences in high school, specifically in how they related to caring. Through this methodology, I like a painter had the opportunity to capture on paper rather than canvas and write (depict) the experiences. After collecting these stories, I applied analytical approaches such as coding to identify patterns and make contextual connections amongst the different stories. In the end, I shared the collection of stories to inform others about the experiences of African American high school students, empower the participants to continue to use their voices, and promote positive social change.

Narration in the form of storytelling has been a characteristic of many cultures, including African Americans. Creswell (2013) suggested that a "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of event/actions, chronologically connected" (p. 54). The use of a narrative approach to gather interview data allowed me to capture and report each participant's story in a manner that they conceptualized. The students and their supporting adults were able to share and describe

their lived experience in their own spoken language as their mind dictated without alteration. The use of the narrative form aided me in ascertaining the research participants' thinking about and experiences of a caring teacher and added to the existing body of qualitative research in the areas of caring teachers and African American high school students' relationships with teachers.

### **Definitions**

In order to better comprehend and apply the (unique) terminology used throughout this study, the following definitions were utilized throughout the study.

*Achievement gap:* A term commonly used to define the differences in standardized assessment scores amongst African American/Black students, White, and other non-White racial and ethnic groups (Au, 2016). These differences in scores are usually measured and reported for the school subject areas of English/language arts and mathematics.

*African American/Black:* “[A]n American of African and especially black African descent” (African American, 2015). African American is the dominant classification used throughout this study; however, Black is interchangeably used upon occasion.

*Afrocentric:* “[E]mphasizing or promoting emphasis on African culture and the contributions of Africans to the development of Western civilization” (Afrocentric, 2015). Educators and other persons are described as “Afrocentric” when they teach and/or promote the African culture.

*Cared-for:* Persons who receive the caring actions, words, or effects from another, the one-caring (Noddings, 1984). In this study, the cared-for is traditionally the student.

*Caring teachers:* A teacher who demonstrates concern, regard, interest, support, and respect for a student's well-being—academically, socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically that usually is demonstrated at level that extends beyond the minimal, surface, or expected.

*Disparities:* In the educational system, a number of pronounced differences existing between African American, White, and other minority group primary and secondary students. These differences exist commonly in standardized assessment scores, disciplinary actions, overall academic achievement, and graduation rates between certain racial and ethnic groups. (Cavanagh et al., 2014; Valenzuela, 1999). For this study, African Americans are the specific racial group of interest.

*High school students:* Persons classified as school children enrolled in Grades 9 (freshman), 10 (sophomore), 11(junior), or 12 (senior).

*Marginalization:* When persons or a group of persons are treated differently in a negative, demeaning, or damaging manner, such as being treated as insignificant (Cavanagh, 2009).

*Middle school students:* Persons classified as school children enrolled in Grades 6, 7, or 8.

*Minoritization:* A process that occurs over an extended period of time in which a dominant culture or group of persons perceive that the culture of the minority group is infiltrating the dominant culture or group (Cavanagh, 2009). This occurrence is usually viewed from a negative perspective by the dominant culture or group.



*Minority*: “[A] group of people who are different from the larger group in a country, area, [school], etc., in some way (such as race . . .)” (Minority, 2015).

According to the American Community Survey Five-Year Data Profile for 2011-2015 (2015), the following represented the racial categories recognized as minority in the United States: Black or African American; American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and “Some other race” for those who identify with one race or racial group; each of these persons are also classified as minorities in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). White was the only other racial category noted in the race demographics; these persons are classified as nonminority in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

*Nonminority*: “[A] group of people who are ‘not’ different from the larger group in a country, area, [school], etc., in some way (such as race . . .)” (Nonminority, 2015).

*One-caring*: Persons who give/extend the “caring” actions, words, or effects towards/for another—cared-for (Noddings, 1984). In this study, the one-caring is traditionally the teacher and sometimes an administrator.

*Postsecondary*: Designation assigned to institutions that provide educational services for students who have completed a secondary education (graduated or received an equivalent certificate, such as General Education Diploma [GED] or Test Assessing Secondary Completion [TASC]). This designation also refers to institutions classified as colleges or universities in the United States.

*Primary (school)*: This designation is assigned to educational institutions servicing children in elementary or kindergarten and Grades 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

*Racialization*: In this process, persons are categorized or differentiated based on racial and/or ethnic characterization (Cavanagh, 2009). This process, like marginalization, can have a negative effect on those persons being racialized.

*Relationships*: The connections, bonding, interactions, exchange, whether positive or negative, between and amongst persons. Relationships are critical to the concepts of cared-for and one-caring (Noddings, 1984).

*Secondary (school)*: Designation assigned to educational institutions servicing children in middle school or high school, Grades 6, 7, 8, 9 (freshman), 10 (sophomore), 11 (junior), or 12 (senior).

*Teacher efficacy*: An education professional's belief in their ability and desire to successfully perform their professional responsibility to further student learning so that students attain a certain outcome or measure of effectiveness (Paine, 2019).

*Teacher-student/student-teacher relationships*: The connections, bonding, interactions, exchange, whether positive or negative, between and amongst teacher and student in a class or other school environment. In this study, this relationship's dynamic is vital in fostering a caring or noncaring linkage.

*Theory of ethics of care /caring*: A theory developed by Noddings (2003) that has significant application in the field of education. This theory promotes that caring is a natural action performed and wanted by humans and animals. The theory represents the conceptual framework for this study.

*White*: “[O]f or relating to a race of people who have light-colored skin and who come originally from Europe (White, 2015).

Many other terms not listed in this section are defined throughout the text of this study.

### **Assumptions**

Several central assumptions guided this study. The structural assumption was that school corporations were eager and willing to participate in a research study associated with an accredited higher education institution, especially if the study had the potential to be both beneficial to the school corporation and cast a positive image of the school corporation, its employees (specifically, teachers and administrators), and students. Another assumption was that the research participants (administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students) would be unrestricted and authentic in sharing their stories and responding to the research questions. An additional assumption was that the qualitative approach of “portraiture” was the most suited approach to capture the experience of the research participants. A final assumption was that the experiences of African American high school students and their supporting adults were essential to defining a caring teacher.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, the scope was the experiences of four to five African American high school students at one public high school in Grades 9 through 12 and their perceptions of a caring teacher or caring teachers. The scope included the experiences of those four to five African American high school students’ supporting adult, administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher. Lastly, the scope explored the caring relationships between teacher-student/student-teacher.

The purpose of this study was to inform and enhance the body of literature concerning African American high school students and their caring relationships with teachers. A delimitation of the study was that only African American high school students were the focus of the study. It is known that the experiences of other minority high school student populations could contribute to the body of literature. However, these other minority populations were not seen as predominant to exploring the central or sub-research questions. Other culturally diverse persons had participated in similar studies; however, the literature was silent with regard to the voices of persons who were African American on this topic (Cavanagh et al., 2014). Another associated delimitation of the study was that only administrators, parent/guardian(s), teachers, and high school students would be interviewed. It is also known that middle school students and their supporting adults could add a dimension to the research study not provided by high school students. A second delimitation was that Noddings' (2003) ethic of care was the only conceptual framework by which this study was bound; however, other theories might apply to this study and be appropriate as the study unfolded through data collection and analysis. A final delimitation was that the research participants (African American high school students and their supporting adults) were associated with the same high school. The participants did not represent several high schools within the community; they only represented one public high school in the community.

### **Significance**

This study has the potential to inform and even transform the understanding of what constitutes caring teachers for African American high school students. Existing

research noted that African American high school students positively benefited from authentic relationships with caring adults who were not members of their family (Bulanda, Tellis, & McCrea, 2015). Having access to a vision for what constitutes a caring and authentic relationship from multiple perspectives could certainly inform how to promote authentic relationships between teachers and African American high school students and could possibly cultivate the success of African American high school students. Another contribution are potential practices that could be employed by teachers and other educators within the classroom and school setting to support African American high school students and work to decrease existing gaps (both achievement and color gaps). Educators who implemented instructional and curricular practices that promote racial and ethnic inclusivity and multiculturalism were found to benefit not only racially and ethnically diverse students but all students (Medina Jimenez, Guzmán, & Maxwell, 2014). Another promising way in which this study could contribute is in the area of policy reform. Caring relationships with high school students have been found to improve the academic success of African American high school students and to disrupt the school to prison pipeline (Porter, 2015). Higher levels of graduation from high schools, which potentially lead to matriculation into postsecondary institutions and positive integration into society, decrease the likelihood of African Americans entering the U.S. penal system. Hymel and Katz (2019) observed that educators need to know how to culturally connect to all of their students. Findings from this study could offer specific ideas to inform preservice and practitioner educator preparation and training programs. Improved and informed practices on caring could strengthen teacher-student

relationships for African American high school students and offer mechanisms for equalizing the current disproportionalities that exist between African Americans and their high school counterparts.

### **Summary**

This study explored the experiences of African American high school students and their supporting adults as it related to their relationship with a caring teacher. Chapter 1 introduced the problem that African American students need and desire to have caring relationships with teachers; however, the data concerning the academic performance of African American high school students and their other minority and White peers reflected connections that denoted disparities and disproportionalities (Gregory et al., 2010). To best explore the research problem, the conceptual framework was Noddings' (1984) ethic of care. The central research question was: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher? In my exploration, I gathered authentic stories told from the perspective of the participants and create a narrative of their stories. Through the narrative style of "portraiture," I captured and share the lived experiences of the African American high school students and their supporting adults.

In Chapter 2: Literature Review, I will discuss the current body of research literature as it applies to various themes related to the study. Some of the dominant themes are my conceptual framework, Noddings' ethic of care; African American high school students; the supporting adults—administrators, parents/guardians, and teachers;

teacher-student relationships; and disparities associated with African American high school students. I will also discuss literature that highlights the gap in the research that supports the necessity for this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to capture the voice of African American high school students and their supporting adults: high school teachers, administrators, and parent(s)/guardian(s) as they pertained to caring teacher-student relationships. This research study was significant because it contributed to the present body of qualitative research literature by filling a void, the absence of the voices of African American high school students as they pertained to the focus of this study. Furthermore, the research in this literature review supported the need for the research focus and reflected the void of African American high school student voice, perspective, and representation. Chapter 2: Literature Review comprises several subheadings and includes the following topics: Noddings' Ethics of Care; Caring and Caring in the Classroom; Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy and Practices: Reinforcements of Teacher Caring; Teacher Characteristics and Practices with Ethnically Diverse and High-Need Student Populations; and African American High School Students. I provide a summation of the complete literature review in succession to the discussion of each subtopic.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Many research studies in the literature review addressed some aspect of interest and relevance to the study; however, no one article in part or whole addressed any one topic or subtopic of the current study. I conducted an exhaustive search that included the use of these online databases: Academic Search Complete, Dissertations & Theses,



EBSCO Host, Education Research Complete, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research Datasets (ICPSR), LexisNexis Academic, Political Science Complete, ProQuest and ProQuest Central, PsycARTICLES, SAGE Premier, SAGE Stats, SOcINDEX, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search. These databases were primarily accessed via the Walden University Library and secondarily via other private and public universities' online library resources, databases, and catalogs. My acquisition of many of the resources and journal articles was the result of electronic retrieval and by physical search and retrieval through periodicals and stacks in the library. Search engines were also a method by which I found journal articles; the primary search engines were Google Scholar and Google. To access the most relevant and recent peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, I used a list of search terms. This list was exhaustive, and the items were not numbered in any order of significance.

- Discipline policies and practices
- School discipline
- Exclusionary discipline practices
- Out-of-school suspensions
- Minor infractions
- Nonviolent infractions
- Minor disruptions
- Suspensions
- Expulsions
- Restorative justice

- Repeat a grade
- School drop-out rates
- Juvenile justice system
- Zero tolerance (policies)
- School climate (positive and negative)
- Well-rounded curriculum
- Rigorous curriculum
- Academic achievement
- Standardized test scores
- Grade retention
- Safe schools
- Consistent expectations and consequences
- Alternative strategies to address student behavior
- Civil rights
- Fairness
- Equity
- Reformative practices – federal, state, and district level
- Data and analysis
- Discipline laws and policies
- Alternative disciplinary practices
- Social and emotional learning (curricula)
- Positive behavioral intervention

- Positive behavioral support frameworks
- Suspension rooms replaced with learning centers
- Intervention teams (assist students and families)
- Nondiscriminatory practices
- Best practices
- School discipline laws and regulations
- Supportive school discipline initiative
- Privacy laws (violations)
- Cultural competence(cy) (training)
- Disaggregated student discipline data

### **Conceptual Framework: Noddings' Ethics of Care**

The conceptual framework for this study was Noddings's (2013) ethics of care. It is a particularly appropriate and connected to the focus of this study on caring teachers for African American high school students. The discussion in this section addresses the most relevant concepts including: relational or feminine care; one-caring and cared-for; the ethics of care; and the ethics of care and schooling.

#### **More Relational than Feminine**

The ethics of care addresses a fundamental aspect of human existence, the need to give and receive care. "As human beings we want to care and to be cared for" (Noddings, 2013a, p. 7). Wanting to care is a concept in which a person desires to extend beyond their own world in order to capture, tap into, reach, and/or give to another person—emotionally, spiritually, physically, or in some other manner, such as

educationally. To be cared for is a concept in which a person receives the efforts of another person into their own world, and in most situations, the cared for must be receptive to the giver in order to fully receive from them. To be cared for is the essential complement to wanting to care. That is, if the concept of being cared for did not exist, then the concept of wanting to care would have no reason to exist. These two dynamics together define the ethics of care's concept of "care."

Care in both the Western and Eastern world was commonly associated with feminine attributes, including mothering, as evidenced in the images, symbols, and ideals associated with care. The concept of caring and its connectedness to the feminine was a key theme throughout Noddings' first edition of *Caring* in the classical sense of responsiveness, receptivity, and relatedness (1984, p. 2). By viewing caring from this classical perspective, Noddings permitted the reader to associate caring with characteristics commonly associated with women. These three characteristics connoted that the person who was giving (wants to care) was open and receptive to the wants and needs of the one to be cared for (another outside of themselves). However, as Noddings' ethics of care and her perspective on caring evolved, caring became more about relationships—the giver and the receiver—and transcended the gender classifications of feminine/female and masculine/male. Regardless of the perspective, feminine or relational, from which caring was viewed, the connection between the giver and the receiver of care constituted a type of relationship, and the relationship required an interchange between the involved participants, whether directly or indirectly.

### **The One-caring and the One Cared-for**

The one-caring and the one cared-for constituted the essence of a caring relationship. Noddings (1984) purported that both the one-caring and the one cared-for were either male or female, but for the purpose of ascribing gender-role classifications in the relationship, Noddings identified the one-caring as feminine and the one cared-for as masculine. In assigning gender roles to the relationship participants, Noddings further made the association with the classical views of what it meant to be feminine and masculine. In the role of the one-caring, the feminine was the one who identified (felt) that a need existed in another individual. This other individual in this classical perspective was masculine, the one cared-for. Consequently, the one-caring extended outside of self in order to meet the need(s) in relation to the one cared-for by being receptive and responsive to the one cared-for.

The one-caring was not merely moved by feelings with respect to the one cared-for; she (in the classical sense) or he was moved by some force within to act in the role of one-caring for the other, the cared-for. “My [Her] motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps, although not necessarily, toward his ends. . . . I put it [motive energy] at the service of the other” (Noddings, 2013a, p. 33). When a person cares for another, they are responding to impulses within themselves that were stirred by some inexplicable urgency to act, be, say, or exist. When a person cares for another, they are not always cognizant of a desired outcome, whether for themselves or for the one cared-for. However, the one-caring is aware of the existence of some need, whether describable, identifiable, or

neither. That need requires some form of attention to be actualized with the one cared-for and is necessary for the potential relationship.

The one cared-for is receptive to the actions, words, and attitude of the one-caring; this receptiveness by the cared-for promotes the necessary atmosphere for reciprocity to occur within the relationship between the one-caring and the cared-for. The cared-for responds to the one-caring (Noddings, 2013a). If the one cared-for acknowledges and accepts the attitude, actions, and words of the one-caring, it is logical to conclude that the one-caring cared in a manner that was considered acceptable to the cared-for. On the contrary, if the one-cared for rejects the giving from the one-caring, it is also a logical conclusion that the one-caring did not care in a manner that the one cared-for needed or perceived to be of a giving nature. Hence, “he” did not receive from “her” giving, classically speaking. In either instance, a receptive relationship requires some sense of what was right/good and wrong/bad to exist between the one-caring and the cared-for. This sense was denoted as “ethics.” Ethical caring stems from the act of natural caring.

### **The Ethics of Care**

Ethics is most frequently associated with morality and the practice of right/good and wrong/bad actions and its application to decision-making. In the act of ethical caring, judging is not the primary focus but rather raising a perception of and sensitivity to morality (Noddings, 2013a). In ethical caring, the one-caring should not choose to care or choose not to care because they determined the one to be cared-for as lacking morals or ethics in the common perspective. However, this determination could have

some influence on the one-caring's decision of whether and/or how to care. The one-caring could and should apply moral and ethical aspects to their own actions and decisions and hope to instill, reinforce, or enhance the one cared-for's moral and ethical propensity and perceptions by the one-caring's actions and decisions. This is not a simple task nor is it one that could or should be accomplished in a limited amount of time. Ethical caring with little to no emphasis on judging should take as much time as needed and maintain the ethical ideal for the given situation, process, and persons involved, especially when those persons are of school age.

### **Ethics of Care and Schooling**

As applied to education, ethics and the ethics of care helps foster an environment where students can experience, both directly and indirectly, the ways in which people should interact with one another. Such interactions can also help students strengthen their self-identity and identify how they should be in the world. According to Noddings (1984), one's caring for another as well as one's memory of being cared for forms the basis of ethical response. Caring and caring relationships are just as important to a child's development outside the school setting as they are within the school setting. Outside the school setting, common relationships that involve care include familial—nuclear and extended; community—church or neighborhood center; and social—neighborhood friends and organizations. Within the school setting, common relationships that involve care included social—school friends and classmates/peer groups; support staff and administrators—classroom aides and principals; and teachers—homeroom and core/co-curricular subject areas.

Cocurricular inside and outside of the educational setting contribute to a student's overall development. Noddings (2013a; 2013b) stated that working cooperatively with others through a child's stages of development greatly aided in both the child's sense of competence and companionship. Accordingly, in light of the ethics of care and its application to education, co-curricular activities and the support of teachers of co-curricular activities add value to a student's development—academically and personally—because of their incorporation of teamwork, leadership building, and cooperation. Each of these aptitudes are necessary for giving and receiving in a caring relationship and are not always emphasized or incorporated as regularly in core-curricular subject areas. Fundamentally, the amount of time that a student spends with a teacher within any given school-year successively aides the student's perceptions, experiences, and development as it relates to identifying, developing, and functioning in ethical caring relationships as either the one-caring or the one cared-for. The latter is the role most commonly associated with students in the caring relationship; however, the former does and should occur for a student's overall development and encounter with responsiveness, receptivity, and relatedness.

School-aged persons, including high school students, want to care for others and things as well as want others and things to care for them; they seek to be cared-for and to care, that is, be in relation to others. Noddings (2007) noted that the major difference between virtue or morality ethics and care ethics is that care ethics is concerned with relation. In its application to schools, the ethics of care is more related to the relationships that exist and form as a consequence of caring. As noted previously, the



need for caring transcends gender, ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, and age. Consequently, it is not uncommon for a teacher to demonstrate care for their students by placing expectations upon them that they might deem challenging because these expectations cause them to go beyond their norm or the norms established by other teachers. In return, it is not uncommon for the students to meet or rise to the expectations established by their teacher to acknowledge their awareness of the teacher's caring and to reciprocate that care towards the teacher. This interchange exemplified what Noddings (1984, 2002, & 2013a) saw as the ethics of care at work—responsiveness, receptivity, and relatedness—in the field of education.

In conclusion, in order for one to truly consider ethics and its application to and in the field of education, an individual must put aside the religious context and consider a more philosophical perspective of morality. Noddings (2007) stated that morality in the context of schools and education had a much broader meaning and connoted how we should be as individuals and how individuals should be with one another. Both educators and noneducators should not be hesitant to find cause for noting that caring is an important aspect of a student's educational experience. Education professionals, especially teachers, play a fundamental role in creating a caring experience for students, including the application of care in schools. Moreover, teachers have the potential to form caring relationships with their students directly and indirectly due to the nature of their interaction and the nature of the classroom environment. Ultimately, the teacher has the potential to form, actualize, and exist in relation to and in a caring way with their students.

## **Literature Review**

Literature relevant to this study's focus encompass research into how educational settings consider and address the experiences of African American students, particularly at the high school level. The thematic categories identified for this discussion include: caring in the classroom; culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy and practices; teacher characteristics and practices with ethnically diverse and high-need student populations; and African American high school students. This section offers findings related to each of these areas and in doing so, lays a foundation for the research undertaken in this study.

### **Caring in the Classroom**

The pedagogy of caring has many interpretations as it applies to the field of education—primary and secondary, however, its application to high school holds particular promise for promoting positive outcomes. Although many studies exist on caring, few studies examined the student and teacher relationship on the level of high school students in the United States, and even fewer studies factored ethnicity, specifically African American/Black students, into the investigation of teacher-student relationships (Barnett, 2016; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2014; Gasser, Grütter, Buholzer, & Wettstein, 2017; Kamrath, 2019). Studies regarding care in schools are needed that provide the perspective of African American high school students because these students represent a marginalized student population. By capturing the voice of this student population, not only is the pedagogy of care improved as it pertains to them, but also the quality of their overall education is improved. When individuals,

including students, have a forum where their voices are heard, the possibility for engagement increases for them.

Students want to have positive experiences engaging with and performing for their teachers. When students perceived that their teachers were caring towards them, they were more motivated in the classroom and retained instructional content and information (Barnett, 2016; Kamrath, 2019). The ethics of care promotes reciprocity. In the process of caring, there must be two components—the one caring and the one cared for—in order for the reciprocity to occur. In the case of education, these components must be persons and include primarily the student and a supporting adult within the school setting. The adult most frequently is a teacher, but it can be an administrator. The closeness of the relationship between the student and the teacher is a key factor as to whether a student identifies the teacher as caring. Despite the many innovations to schooling and instruction, many high schools are not structured in such a manner that promotes caring, whether inside or outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is essential for a teacher to foster and promote an environment of caring within the classroom.

Within a school setting, adolescent youth have interests in developing caring relationships with teachers and other school personnel. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) noted that it was crucial for adolescent youth to develop caring relationships with nonparental/guardian adults, especially teachers, in order to establish a sense of connection to the school community. Students want to be cared for by their teachers, even when they demonstrate the contrary. Teachers and other school personnel are an extension of the adult persons who provide and offer supervision, guidance, support, care,

and relationships that students have inside of their home and community. The care shown by educators towards students help them to develop the skills, especially social skills, necessary to interact with others within the school setting. These social skills are just as vital to a student's success within the classroom.

Within the classroom of a caring teacher, a student is more likely to engage in positive behaviors. The students felt valued and had a sense of belonging; took a personal interest in their academic undertakings; experienced greater occurrences of academic achievement, especially within the classroom of the caring teacher; and developed cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Nganga, Kabutu, & Han, 2019). The effect of a caring teacher could have a far-reaching scope of impact for students within and outside of their classroom. In some instances, a teacher's demonstration of concern—great or small—for a student could only have a positive impact within their given classroom setting but also could transfer into other settings, within the school environment. These settings include other classrooms; the hallways; lunchroom; and other gathering places, such as a commons or schoolyard. Furthermore, these actions by the students aide in their creation of a sense of caring for and belonging to the school community.

When students have a connection to their schools, they become more vested in both their academic success and the school environment. In adolescence, students sought relationships with teachers to feel connected in school, which conversely influenced their pursuit of education (Barnett, 2016; Kamrath, 2019). "Connection" for a student could have several meanings. From the present perspective, connection means belonging. A

student who is connected to their school take an interest in the instruction offered by the teacher. However, this connection is further strengthened when the student experiences caring by the teacher toward them. Consequently, a strengthened connection with a teacher leads to more concern, input, output, and improved academics from the student.

However, for some educators, caring for students is not a desired or demonstrated option. Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji, and Wright (2012) shared that many teachers viewed relationship building with students as a time-consuming and involved process rather than a process that occurred naturally through positive interactions and caring. Many educators might not consider this as a possible reason as to why their students do not perform at the level of their expectation and is due to the teacher's lack of or limited or altered demonstration of care. Conversely, some students portray images that are antagonistic toward educators, especially teachers, because the students perceive that the teacher does not care. This lack of care includes perceptions about them as people, students, and/or African Americans. Despite the reasoning behind the teacher's lack of care or the student's perception of the care, a caring environment is needed in the classroom if not both within the classroom and the school community. Teachers are at the forefront in fostering a caring environment within a classroom setting, which affects the whole school environment.

### **Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy and Practices: Reinforcements of Teacher Caring**

One method that is effective in fostering caring teacher-student relationships, especially in the classroom setting, is through culturally responsive teaching. Culturally

responsive teaching enhanced student motivation and achievement (Cholewa et al., 2012). Culturally responsive teaching does not necessarily mean that the teacher of the student must be the same race of the (majority of) students in order to motivate and guide students to achieve academically. Culturally responsive teaching means that the teacher is mindful of their students' racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Teachers who are culturally responsive find authentic opportunities to incorporate differing perspectives from various cultures, especially that of their students, in meaningfully instructional methods. It means that the teacher makes and takes the initiative to engage with the student in a manner that reflects interest in who the student is and goes beyond the fact that the student is enrolled in the class. Culturally responsive teachers approach "getting to know" their students from a variety of approaches, traditional and nontraditional.

Teachers who approach their curriculum and instruction from a culturally relevant perspective, especially when working in educational environments where students of African descent are the majority, are often called "Afrocentric." Afrocentric and non-Afrocentric teachers differ in their approach to teaching. According to Akua (2020), the former approached instruction and learning from a *centered* stance and "stood on *djed*, a firm foundation;" whereas, the latter approached instruction and learning from a *de-centered* [unstable foundation] stance, and those "*de-centered* . . . must be *re-centered*" when focused on an African centered approach to education (p. 109). These two approaches have different effects for the student as well as different perceptions within educational and school settings by persons within the United States. Culturally responsive teaching is one concept that utilizes terminology that is more accepting both

within the field of education and by persons within the United States. Most poignantly, culturally responsive teaching does not mean that the teacher becomes like the student. However, it does mean that there is some level of acknowledgment, awareness, and acceptance from a pedagogical perspective.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is an educational practice that has the potential for acceptance within both of the aforementioned realms. Culturally responsive pedagogy could be used and understood in four contexts: “cultural celebration,” “trivialization,” “essentializing culture,” and “substituting cultural for political analysis of inequalities” (Sleeter, 2012). Cultural celebration promotes the surface or shallow level of (a) given culture(s) or ethnic group(s) because of the disconnection to meaningful learning. In such practices, teachers emphasize what might be considered by other practitioners as superficial aspects of a culture for the sake of celebratory acts. Further consideration might suggest that these practices are not for promoting deeper meaning and connections to enhance and extend the learning experience for all students rather than for just those of the particular culture(s) that the celebration highlights.

Most cultures have some day and/or event that they hold significant and celebrate among themselves. Quite often, persons of a different culture celebrate that day or event as well. Consequently, many students participate in these cultural celebrations in school. In Hajisoteriou, Karousiou, and Angelides (2017), in an effort to promote cultural diversity and interculturalism, teachers at an elementary school in Cyprus (Eastern Mediterranean) held a schoolwide cultural celebration in which several activities honored indigenous cultures represented by the student body within the school. Hajisoteriou et al.

(2017) interviewed 40 students who had participated in the cultural celebrations at their school and noted that the teachers experienced some enlightenment, but most of the students viewed the activities more as a party and began to display prejudicial treatment towards immigrant students. Hajisoteriou et al. (2017) reported that, overall, the attempt made by the teachers to promote inclusivity and acceptance of diversity had the opposite result. One possible reason for such an outcome could be the preparation phase. Many students engage in cultural celebrations without any awareness as to the reason for the celebration. When this occurs, the possibility of the celebration being used as a transformative experience for the students is minimized or lost. In these cases, the “celebration” for those being recognized becomes a missed learning opportunity for the majority of students; furthermore, the pedagogical experience may be trivialized and an authentic learning opportunity missed for the students.

Students, including high school students, need learning opportunities to be meaningful and educationally sound. According to Sleeter (2012), trivialization involved minimizing culturally responsive pedagogy to steps to be completed rather than designing and offering a deepened learning experience. This can result from educators not understanding what “culturally relevant pedagogy” entails and/or not possessing even a working knowledge of the culture of their students. When a teacher chooses or does not have the time or opportunities to learn about their students’ backgrounds, the probability of utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy decreases and students can feel marginalized.

People who look alike are not always like the other person(s). Essentialization is described by Sleeter (2012) as educators making assumptions and ascribing a set of fixed



characteristics to persons of a given culture, where they pose questions such as: “What are you? Where are you from?” (p. 570). These types of presumptive questions limit, categorize, and generalize persons of an ethnic group and further diminish the intended outcomes of the learning process. In a given urban classroom, a teacher has the potential to be assigned a class roster in which the students represent four or more cultural subgroups. Where teachers do not share cultural background with their students, it becomes challenging for them to imagine and manage culturally relevant pedagogy or facilitate opportunities for deepened lessons and cultural awareness for either students or teachers. It is reasonable to deduce considering the racial/ethnic make-up of the teacher population in the 21st century that the teacher might not be a cultural representative of the majority of their students.

Throughout the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, high school students used their voices, minds, and actions to promote social justice and positive change. Sleeter (2012) reported that “substituting cultural for political analysis of inequalities” meant that rather than address issues of a political nature, such as racism and other forms of discrimination, when learning about ethnic groups, the teacher resorted to discussions of little to no controversy (p. 571). It is probable that teachers choose not to address issues of a political nature that center on matters of race, ethnicity, and culture because they are not knowledgeable about, not comfortable addressing, or possess irreverence toward the particular group(s). Nevertheless, opportunities for such discussion are necessary for both the intellectual growth and development of the student’s (youth’s) mind and their academic enterprise. For some educators, only certain subjects

or disciplines warrant such discursive opportunities, and these subjects frequently include the humanities, history/social studies and English/language arts.

English and history are two disciplines with ideologies that provide various opportunities—curricular, pedagogical, and celebratory—for teachers to address cultural awareness and development. Sleeter (2012) noted that “oversimplified and distorted conceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy, which do not necessarily improve student learning, lend themselves to dismissal of the entire concept” (p. 572). For example, when discussing the explorations of John Smith in the “New World” (later to be named the United States of America) and his encounters with Pocahontas and her American Indian people (often misnamed “Indians” even during culturally relevant teaching opportunities), teachers elect to discuss the “first Thanksgiving” (Kamma, 2001). During the discussion, teachers choose to only focus on the community that is formed between the American Indian (the natives) and the British colonists (explorers and new inhabitants) and never address the tumultuous and contentious events that lead to the “culminating” event or “union” of the cultures, the first Thanksgiving. Experiences such as this can undermine both the teachers’ cultural responsiveness and the opportunity to build community for the students.

For ethnically diverse students, social capital plays a vital role in a student’s development of self-worth and their building of community within the educational constructs. Research findings have indicated that social capital and racial socialization were intertwined and that the factors promoting racial and ethnic community were driven by racial and cultural socialization and resulted in positive outcomes for African

American students (Trask-Tate et al., 2014). Parents of African American students fight for quality and equal educational opportunities for their children. In one such illustration, these actions culminated in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in which the legal doctrine of “separate but equal” was ruled a *Constitutional* violation, and African American students were granted access to services, institutions, rights, and opportunities, specifically the integration of racially segregated schools, that were previously denied to them. When teachers do not consider the unique values, perspectives, judgments, and personalities associated with their students of color (when developing curriculum or delivering instruction), the opportunity for the widening of the social capital and cultural gaps persists. When teachers do not create fair, peaceful, nurturing, and educationally sound classrooms, they risk the opportunity for all students to experience success. Ultimately, quality instruction that benefits all students—ethically and nonethnically diverse—must be the focal point for all educators and educational environments.

Students can experience academic success in schools that have all the latest advances; however, the teacher-student connection may be an even more important factor in students’ academic success. “Aesthetic caring” a concept coined by Valenzuela (1999) is more aligned with a school’s acquiring the latest and the greatest aids to promote and enhance student academic achievement; whereas, “authentic caring” another original concept of Valenzuela’s is more aligned with the ideal that real and meaningful relationships formed between students and teachers (teacher-student connections) can support students’ academic achievement. Aesthetic caring is a concept that more and

more schools are mastering. While many schools across the country are equipped with the most up-to-date technological advancements, with classrooms wired and all students supplied with a personal computer (chrome book, laptop, or tablet for use at home and school), technology is no substitute for authentic relationships between teachers and African American students. Authentic caring can only truly occur between teachers and African American students when each individual sees the other as having value and worth beyond the role that they serve or represent in the school environment and society. Furthermore, authentic caring occurs when teachers see African American students as unique persons with unique needs, wants, and experiences; see African American students as individuals not defined by their racial or ethnic identifier; see African American students as persons both wanting and needing care; and see the necessity for the improvement of academic, social, and personal outcomes for African American students.

Public educational institutions serve as the locale for free opportunities for advancement—socially and academically for both ethnic/racially diverse and nonethnic/racially diverse populations. Nevertheless, African American and other minorities continuously scored significantly lower on standardized assessments than did their nonethnic/racial counterparts (Kevelson, 2019). When outcomes such as lowered achievement, lack of performance, and limited to no advancement—socially, academically, culturally, and financially—occurs for students of color as a result of their direct participation in the public education system, the American dream is deferred and possibly erased for American minorities. In addition, the manifestation of authentic

caring is forgotten if not merely lost in such scenarios. A quality “free” public education is considered to be a compelling attraction by many immigrants to America. However, African Americans are not immigrants coming to or living in the United States. African Americans are members of a human subculture of persons born in this country. As a consequence, African Americans are (and should be) guaranteed the rights afforded all American citizens, including the right to a quality education.

Culturally relevant pedagogy supports an environment in which African American high school students’ can feel connected to their teachers, school, and academics. Martin and Beese (2015) conducted a qualitative study in which under-achieving/at-risk African American high school students were interviewed about their perceptions of an English course. In this course, the teacher utilized tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy in her approach to writing and literature. One African American male student, James, participant responded, “I like to write things that push my mind to be colorful. All my work is to my best ability and I have put much time in to this class. . . . I like school a lot now and am working all day long [James]” (p. 1221). These words coming out of James signify that he now has a sense of purpose and connection to not only his English class but all of his classes and certainly believes that his English teacher believes in him. A sense of belonging might seem trivial to many persons both within and outside of the field of education. One way to make any person—young or old—feel that they belong and matter is simply to include them. The inclusion does not have to be obtrusive; it can simply be done by openly asking a question that invites students to respond and share their perspective, which can be a form of cultural inclusion. Teaching

that is not culturally inclusive and sensitive has a high degree of potential for tearing-down rather than lifting-up minority students, especially African Americans.

It is possible that many college students pursuing a career in the field of education never deliberately consider or explore the concept of cultural relevancy during their academic experience or prior to their entry into the field. Bales (2015); Grenot-Scheyer (2016); Hernández, Darling-Hammond, Adams, Bradley, and Learning Policy Institute (2019); and Hymel and Katz (2019) asserted that teacher education programs on college and university campuses had a responsibility to prepare future educators to address the needs of all students, including minorities, racially diverse, and indigenous students. Conversely, if teacher education programs do not provide such preparation, it is up to the individual teacher to take responsibility for developing skills in the area of culturally responsive learning and instruction. If not sooner, preparation for a teacher can begin the moment they pursue employment.

A teacher meeting the required qualifications for certification and licensure are not enough; further preparation and knowledge in the areas of urban, high-poverty, high-crime, low-performing and underserved educational environments is necessary to best prepare to service students representative of such areas. Teacher efficacy plays a crucial role in a teacher's ability to reach their students and the quality of instruction that they offer their students. Teacher efficacy ultimately leads to student achievement and a caring classroom and school environment. Urban education as well as the students attending urban schools, especially African Americans, need teachers with the ability and desire to care for their academic and personal well-being. As such, certain typologies

exist in order for both a beginning-teacher (practitioner) as well as a tenured teacher (practitioner) to be effective educators in environments with racial/ethnic-minorities and English Language Learners (ELL).

In one qualitative study conducted by Robinson and Lewis (2017) in an urban school, White and racial/ethnic minority teacher participants identified typologies, classifications of teacher-types, which were necessary to adequately meet the needs of urban, especially African American, students. Based upon evidence provided by Robinson and Lewis (2017), these were some of the typologies identified by the teachers: (a) “Anti-Deficit teachers,” “always look for the best;” (b) a “Cultural Pedagogue,” “that teacher who knows who his or her students are and integrate students’ cultural background [into the curriculum and instruction];” (c) a “Love Pedagogy,” “there should be someplace . . . that they know that they are loved . . . for who they are, what they are, what they contribute;” and (d) “Conductor/Coach,” “I really think about teaching being so much more than just content, right? It becomes more about relationships. . . . It becomes more about understanding others” (pp. 128-129).

The students who suffer the most are those who encounter certain factors: live in impoverished communities, are ethnically and racially diverse, are classified as urban adolescents, and who attend schools with minimal to no teacher efficacy and/or do not have the typologies noted-above present in their educational environments. Considering these factors, it was noteworthy that African American students attending suburban and urban high schools were more often in danger of experiencing these factors (Lac & Diamond, 2019). Measures must be taken to improve both the educational and

noneducational related outcomes for African American high school students. These outcomes can begin to improve student and teacher relationships as well as teacher efficacy. Ultimately, when teachers were comfortable in their classrooms and with the students that they taught, all students benefitted from the educational environment (Robinson & Lewis, 2017).

Adolescence (particularly high school years) for many youth is a turbulent—emotionally, socially, academically, culturally, physically, and spiritually—stage of life, and one in which they believe that adults “just don’t understand.” Groenke et al. (2015) reported that youth of color were more often seen as deviant and uncivilized when they act in manners usually associated with adolescents. They are even seen not as children but adults acting-out and/or engaging in criminal behaviors. Two examples of such situations are in the cases of Trayvon Martin in Miami Gardens, Florida and Jordan Davis in Jacksonville, Florida. Both were African American adolescent males (17 year old) who were shot and killed in 2012 in the U.S. (Greenwell, 2013). Both teenagers’ case come to the forefront of violence against Black (male) youth. Of course, the above-mentioned explanation (referenced Groenke et al., 2015) and adolescents referenced refer to contexts predominantly outside of the educational setting. Nonetheless, many teachers and educators associate these same perspectives to African American adolescents within the context of the school and classroom setting.

African American high school students’ have a multiplicity of needs; however, many high schools are not equipped with the necessary services or people to assist in addressing those needs. In order for African American high school students to be as



successful as possible, according to Zaff and Malone (2020) and Budescu, Sisselman-Borgia, and Taylor (2018), they must be placed in educational settings that best fit their needs—psychologically, developmentally, academically, and culturally. Within an educational setting, the primary need for all students is their academic need; this is due to the common purpose for the founding of schools within society. Notwithstanding, the academic needs are not the only and possibly foremost needs of students, specifically African American high school students. African American high school students have needs that transcend the realms of academics and extend into social, emotional, and mental realms. Many of their needs stem from family, community, cultural, social, societal, political, and health, which is both mental and physical. Some of these needs can be met within the school setting through culturally relevant pedagogical practices, extracurricular activities, service learning opportunities, refining and better organizing “tracking” (matching students with experiences) methods, and school structure, such as time, size, and grade configurations. Consequently, the majority of the needs of African American students cannot be addressed until measures are taken to acknowledge that these needs exist for this student population.

Educators in high schools need to acknowledge that students, including students of color, can be successful when educators address their affective domain. Roberts (2010) furthered this point of view and noted that culturally relevant critical teacher care (CRCTC), which is a subset of critical race theory (CRT), was presently a theoretical hypothesis; however, it should become the practice, especially in dealing with African American students. When educators only address one aspect of the student or choose to

acknowledge only one aspect of the student, the aspect is commonly the academic aspect. Yet, a high school student's affective aspect has an interconnection with their academic aspect. The ethics of care espouses that students want to care and be cared for by their teachers (Noddings, 1984). The affective component is integral to caring. Caring for the affective needs as well as the academic needs of African American and all students in general not only promotes culturally relevant pedagogy but also leads to the promotion and exercise of the ethics of care.

In culturally relevant and responsive teaching, students are afforded opportunities to: connect with their teachers whether or not they look like them; exist as if they are real people with feelings, needs, and aspirations; empower themselves in all aspects of their school and educational experience; and create a familiar/familial setting outside of their home environment. Ladson-Billings (2009) shared that culturally responsive teaching promoted an interdependence between teacher-student and student-student relationships. When African American students feel a sense of belonging and connection with their teachers, the potential for them to strive to perform, behave, and interact with others is significantly strengthened. The potential is strengthened because students sense that it is alright to need support, seek assistance, and accept guidance from their teachers because they trust and believe that their teachers care for them. Furthermore, the sense of community that is fostered by culturally responsive and relevant teaching enhances the perception that it is alright to associate with peers that both look and do not look like them because of the realization that they are in this process of learning together. This being said, some teachers possess certain characteristics and employ certain practices that

enable them to be more effective with African American and other disparate student populations.

### **Teacher Characteristics and Practices with Ethnically Diverse and High-Need Student Populations**

Successful teachers for diverse student populations care about both their students' academic and personal success. Anderson and Martin (2018) shared that successful teachers for gifted African American female students: create instructional environments where students feel safe, promote opportunities for self-confidence building, implement coping strategies, and offer “teachable” moments when successes are not experienced; know who their students are as people, embrace cultural and socialization opportunities, and incorporate culturally relevant instructional content; and communicate effectively with students, teach with a sense of comfort, and find resources (curriculum and people) to support the various needs of gifted African American female students. Possibly, one could make a connection that what Anderson and Martin (2018) identified successful teachers do for gifted African American female students, many of these same practices can be done for gifted African American male students. Despite how the field of education changes by any aspect, successful teachers are able to adapt to these changes and make the acclimation process for students as painless as possible, even if that means forming a community within their classroom and/or school setting. Furthermore, successful teachers strive to form authentic relationships while creating a communal environment within the classroom and school setting. When a teacher does this, they demonstrate that not only does the teacher care about the students as individuals but also

they care for the students as a class, a collective, a community. Conversely, the students feel empowered to care about not only their well-being but also care about the well-being of others—students and teacher in the classroom—the community. The act of building a sense of community among students in a classroom teaches students important skills that are needed throughout life, such as teamwork, empathy, responsibility, compromise, and acceptance.

A student is connected to their environment. Teachers in the Bonner (2014) study recognized both the value and importance of effective and meaningful communication with their students of color and that altering linguistic styles was vital to their connection with the students. Therefore, a teacher can know and understand a student better if they care to know about as well as learn about where the student has their (genealogical, historical, and cultural) roots. Actions such as these on the part of the teacher greatly facilitates in the formation of positive teacher-student relationships. One way to genuinely form caring teacher-student relationships is through communication. Teachers must be willing to “meet” students where they are culturally and linguistically; while, at the same time, teachers must reinforce the societal norms and expectations that promote the students’ academic and personal success.

In the process of getting to “know” their students, caring teachers work to develop relationships built upon trust with not only the students but also the students’ parent(s)/guardian(s) (supporting adults and/or family). These teachers call the parents to share good news as well as bad news and include them in the students’ education, which in-turn forms a level of trust between the parent and the teacher (Bonner, 2014). Caring

teachers even include the supporting adults of their students into the “community” within the classroom. Caring teachers build relationships with the parent(s)/guardian(s) of their students because teachers know that they need support from outside of the classroom environment. Ultimately, a caring teacher realizes the connectedness and importance of family in the students’ culture, and that it does take a village to raise all students.

### **African American High School Students**

**Teachers’ and school leaders’ perceptions.** A teacher or administrator has the ability to positively or negatively impact a student’s life on a daily basis; consequently, they have this impact without ever saying or doing anything but just by being—through their attitude. In Brooks and Watson (2019), White teachers, teacher-leaders, and administrators subconsciously and consciously employed phenotyping (a form of race-based decision making) when perceiving African American male and female students. This type of thinking has negative ramifications because it most often leads to negative perceptions about African American students. Phenotyping causes White educators to ignore individual and specific defining characteristics and group African American students into one general classification. In other words, even when African American students perform at high achievement levels, they are neither treated nor perceived differently from African American students who do not perform at high levels. In Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, and Jennings (2010) this disregard for the students’ achievement presented a quandary for the students because they neither knew nor understood the reasoning behind the mindset or attitude and many times did not know the basis as to why the mindset or attitude even existed about them. Nevertheless, students are quite

perceptive and are able to detect when something is awry, which frequently leads to the conclusion that teachers and administrators just do not care about me—us. It is possible that many teachers and administrators do care and want to be effective with all students, but they do not know how to interact with or feel less capable of teaching African American students. This feeling of inadequacy could be an aftereffect of several reasons, including lack of knowledge as it pertains to the cultural awareness of African Americans and limited to none (significant) lived experience with African American students and/or persons.

It is important for all teachers to believe that they can be effective and make an impactful difference in the academic, social, emotional, and cultural development—tenets of ethics of care—of their students, including African American students. Ladson-Billings (2009) noted that each of the participants (White and Black female classroom teachers) in the reflective and empirical study, *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*, possessed and demonstrated the ethics of care in their practice—academic and nonacademic interaction with their students (predominantly African American). It is for the above-mentioned reasons that many persons choose to be educators—educational professionals—and enter into the field of education in some capacity. Most teachers want to genuinely care for their students and do various things to be and show caring for their students. Despite the fact the Ladson-Billings' (2009) study participants were female, male educators were not devoid of exercising the ethics of care in their work for and interaction with students. However, some teachers, whether White

and non-White or identified as caring or noncaring, have perceptions that are more opinion-based rather than fact-based as it pertains to African American students.

The perceptions that some teachers and administrators have as they pertain to African American students are rooted in these students' culture and (cultural) community. Lynn et al. (2010) reported that some African American teachers and administrators held the following beliefs as they pertained to African American high school students that could be viewed as racist: (a) Parents had negative attitudes and showed little if any involvement in their students' academics; (b) African Americans placed more emphasis upon religion and church more than education and school; (c) African Americans did not recognize the importance of learning and education; and (d) African American students struggled academically because their culture did not promote critical thinking. One cannot deny that these perceptions cover a wide-range of topics and have the potential to be very crippling in reference to instruction, teaching, and learning; and positive relationship building between African American students and their parents, teachers, administrators, home, and community. Nevertheless, these opinions do not speak for all educators of African American high school students. Some educators believe that reasons for low-performance and academic success for African American students, male high school students particularly, have roots in systemic (education) and school practices.

African American teachers of African American high school students question the basis of comparison when it comes to the reporting of these students' academic achievement and the achievement gap. In Lynn et al. (2010), one educator questioned

whether the economic classification was considered when African American students were compared to their educational counterparts. For example, when poor/disadvantaged African American high school students are reported to score lower than their White academic counterparts, are the social classifications of “poor” or “disadvantaged” being ascribed to the White students? Are the poor African American students being compared to middle-class White students? Consideration of such categories of difference can have a significant bearing upon both the findings and the perceptions that form from the findings, which might or might not be valid or justifiable. Furthermore, school leaders support policy and practice changes based upon such findings, which ultimately can be more damaging than helpful for African American, White, and other ethnically classified students as well as for teachers, notably as it pertains to perceptions and caring in the classroom.

Superintendents, administrators, principals, and other school leaders sustain perceptions of African American students, and the perceptions of school leaders whether negative or positive are held by African American, White, and other racially classified school leaders. White educators, including school leaders, held personal perceptions, beliefs, and biases about race that could have been classified as racist (Allen & Liou, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2019; & Radd & Grosland, 2019). Within the context of schools, especially schools with higher percentages of African American students, it is possible that the school leader(s) might make decisions intentionally or unintentionally that individuals can view as unfair and/or unequal treatment of African American students. Furthermore, it is common for school leaders to make weighted decisions as they pertain



to student misbehavior and discipline. Based upon the disproportion of African American high school students that are suspended and expelled for nonbehavior and nondiscipline related infractions, African American high school students and their parents/guardians can deduce that these decisions are colored by the school leader's perceptions of and biases concerning the African American race. However, school leaders can be intentional in their efforts to (try to) change the perceptions that African American high school students and their parents/guardians have of the school leader(s) as they pertain to the treatment, interaction, and relationship with the African American students.

School leaders, White or African American, must work conscientiously and continuously to build positive relationships with African American high school students, especially if the goal is to diminish their own as well as the students' negative perceptions. One White high school principal of a large percentage of minority students in Texas stated that a key to success in lessening the color gap between her and her students was building strong relationships (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Just as teachers, school leaders must find ways to connect with their students in the manner in which they "lead," and it is even more important that they connect with African American high school students, especially considering the perceptions that overshadow their relationships with them. School leaders must find ways to meet African American students where they are—within their communities—by holding community meet-and-greets or by attending community functions and celebrations. It is imperative that school leaders learn about whom African American students are—their cultural roots, traditions,

beliefs, and practices. Lastly, school leaders must seek out methods to relate with students within the school environment—in classrooms, in hallways, and before, during, and after traditional school hours. When African American high school students begin to see that their school leaders care authentically about who they are, from where they come, and about the traditions and practices that they embody that make them African American, African American high school students can begin to trust, connect with, and reap the positive benefits of their school experiences and environment.

**Connectedness, transition to high school, and sense of belonging.** When students transition to high school, a myriad of concerns flow through their mind as it relates to being connected—in all aspects—to the school and the people within the school. Anderson et al. (2019) and Wentzel, Tomback, Williams, and McNeish (2018) noted that students transitioning to high school have concerns about academics, procedures, and the school community. For students who place importance upon their education, most want to do well academically, and this statement does not differ for African American students. However, systemic and nonsystemic barriers exist that can negatively influence how well and if African American students perform well academically in high school. One such factor that can have a negative impact is procedures within the school environment.

As stated earlier, high school students are concerned with the procedures that are in place within their new educational environment. Transitions in a high school were important in a students' success or lack of success (Anderson et al., 2019; Wentzel et al., 2018). These procedures include transitioning from class-to-class and in the hallways;

schoolwide and classroom related rules; and more significantly, the unstated and unwritten rules that seem to govern how students function and should not function within the school setting. These unstated and unwritten rules are many times subjective rather than objective. Lastly, the community—the social component of being and interacting with others—has a significant if not for many students the most significance of each of the three concerns. The community made-up of the school personnel, teachers, administrators, other staff, and the student body represents an extension for many students of their home community. In school, students see and interact with people from their home community, whether student or adult or friend or foe. For some African American students, a disconnection exists between their home community and the school community. These community aspects have the power and potential to further develop students into who they choose to become and to prevent the development into who they choose to become both through the valuing and devaluing of a student's self-esteem and social efficacy, which affects connections with all three areas of a transitioning student's concerns.

The community or social component of a student's educational experience, which is traditionally four years, is significant in many ways to the overall experience as well as the academic and social development of a student. Within the transitions that existed from middle school to high school, including from 9th to 10th to 11th and 12th grade, students of lower economic groups and minorities experienced diminishing social interactions with peers and school personnel (Benner, Boyle, & Bakhtiari, 2017). Most persons, young and old acknowledge the importance that friendships and social

relationships play in their life. It is within the school community that many of these persons form their first significant and lasting relationships with another person outside of their family. For some students, when distress occurs within their friendships and social community or when they do not feel a sense of connection within the school community, there is an effect on grades by this distress, which results in lowered academic achievement. Also, race and ethnicity play a major role in a student's feelings of connectedness within the school environment and culture. Consequently, it is relevant that school leaders and teachers find ways to connect with African American high school students.

African American students can experience difficulty as they try to identify and develop academically and/or intellectually within a school's culture. African American high school students experienced a disconnection between home and school environments (Chu, 2011). For some African American high school students, they feel that it is necessary or a requirement to leave their home-life, neighborhood-life, and cultural norms—life experiences—at the main entrance into the school. These requests are often expressed overtly and covertly by the words and actions of others, especially teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. Thus, as they enter the building, they are to “forget” from where they come, who they are, and what makes (or has made) them as and who they are today. This conscious or subconscious process is a form of “assimilation.” Assimilation is a concept that Walter Lee Younger wrestles with in Hansberry's (1959) play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. As a disenfranchised Black man living in the ghetto on Chicago's Southside and bound by both his environment and society,

Walter Lee infamously embodies and resonates with African Americans/Blacks as he transforms in the wake of his internal and external conflicts with assimilation.

Assimilation is a process in which a member(s) of one culture/ethnic/racial (usually minority) group become like/conform to/take on the attributes and perspectives of another culture/ethnic/racial (usually majority/mainstream) group by choice and/or influence. This process often occurs because the member of the minority group sees some necessity—comfort, survival, or other reason—to conform to the majority group. Furthermore, assimilation often occurs because an individual feels some form of disconnect within society between another individual or others and themselves. In the case of a student, the student senses some type of disassociation between the school environment and themselves.

African American high school students' lack of connection with and belief that school personnel—staff, teachers, and administrators—“do not care” manifests in their poor grades; suspension and dropout rates; and attitudes about and towards school personnel, their academics, and their present and future educational experience. Race, socioeconomic status, and cultural-ecological factors contributed significantly to the poor performance of students of color and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) students, including African Americans (Chu, 2011). Too commonly, schools in the United States that service students of color fail to acknowledge that these students bring with them unique cultural experiences that affect who they are and how they learn. Both by acknowledging and addressing the cultural experiences of students of color, in this case African Americans, education professionals can better prepare, inform, and equip educators to

address the academic, economic, and ecological needs of African American students. When schools address the needs of CLD students, these students are less likely to feel disconnected from school—environment, peoples, and educational experience.

Despite the reasons for the disconnect, it is fair to note in light of Noddings' (2013a) ethics of care that all human beings want to have a sense of belonging and want to be in relation with others, and African American high school students are no exception. Nonetheless, Noddings indicated that organizations, including schools had the potential to diminish the ethical ideal of caring (caring for moral reasons/being in relation to others), and they could do this by the very nature of what it meant to be an "organization" (2013a). Schools as organizations function in a variety of modes that subscribe to sets of rules that dictate both apparently and inapparently how a school deems a student or group of students. Furthermore, the manner in which schools sometimes execute these sets of rules on a daily basis demonstrates and promotes exclusionary practices. Exclusionary practices can range from labeling to ability grouping to removal from class for disciplinary and nondisciplinary reasons and include a wide-range of examples. The recipient(s) of the exclusionary practices assume a sense of alienation as a result, which can lead to feelings and manifestations of disconnect and lack of care.

Consequently, schools, teachers, and other school personnel serve a vital role and hold some responsibility in students' connectedness and relation to and within the educational environment, regardless of any factors, including ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and behavior. Noddings asserted that the American educational system insufficiently supported minority and poor children (2007). The landmark U.S.

Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs The Board of Education* (1954) determined that the practice of “separate but equal” or segregation was unconstitutional; as a consequence, minority and poor children were extended educational opportunities that for years prior were withheld from them. Despite that, it was not until 47 years later when Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and the U.S. government instituted another groundbreaking model of legislation for the purpose of “equalizing” the education field. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) established numerous requirements for educational institutions and educators as it applied to educating poor, underserved, and students of color. Ultimately, a primary but not exclusive aim through the implementation of legislative requirements is to improve the quality of education and be accountable for shortcomings and failings with respect to poor, underserved, and students of color. Thereby, through this act, the U.S. would improve the educational standing (statistics) for this group of students on all educational levels and in all areas of measurement— instruction, assessment, graduation rates, and matriculation into postsecondary institutions. Nevertheless, society’s perception of these students and how professionals approached their education played a fundamental part in meeting the needs of these students established by No Child Left Behind Act (2001). Not only for reasons that pertain to their sense of belonging but also for reasons that pertain to their academic success, teachers, school leaders, policy makers, and all concerned entities need to work together with the hope of diminishing the achievement gap that exists between African American high school students and their educational peers.

**Academic achievement and the achievement gap.** African American high school students are considered to be amongst the most underserved and underperforming student populations, specifically minority groups, in the United States. This representation of African American students continues into young and later adulthood. As reported by Hussar et al. (2020), in 2018 in the United States, 21% of African Americans/Blacks aged 18 to 24 were neither enrolled in a postsecondary institution, licensure, or certificate program; while, in 2018 in the United States, 11% of Whites aged 18 to 24 were neither enrolled in a postsecondary institution, licensure, or certificate program. This indicates that African Americans slightly less than double the rate of Whites. Considering these statistics, educators, policy makers, and all persons need to commit to do whatever they possibly can do to assist in promoting positive change. It is necessary that these persons use their voice to raise awareness, offer their time and talent, and/or give of their treasure—to identify the causes of and find the cure for this national epidemic—in order to bring about the necessary change for African American students and the whole of society.

Educators, policy makers, and citizens desperately need to acknowledge that disparities exist amongst African American students and their peers in high schools and need to acknowledge that there are distinct causes for these disparities. Disconnect existed between African American students and their experiences—academic, socially, and/or emotionally—within educational institutions in the U.S. (Chu, 2011). Numerous factors contribute to the educational disparity that exists for African American high school students in the United States. However, one of the most impactful and telling



factors in many ways is the sense of belonging and connectedness between this student population and the school environment, also called the school climate. The school environment helps or hinders in the process of fostering a sense of belonging for all students, especially African American. Subsequently, when African American high school students feel connected with the people, academics, and the overall school environment, the school systems' use of punitive discipline measures can decrease, and school systems can implement restorative measures in order to bring about the desired change(s) for all involved and concerned parties.

**The discipline gap, zero tolerance, and restorative justice.** Discipline is a component of any educational system, especially within a school environment. A common perception in schools is that discipline is an essential factor. If used efficiently, discipline creates a sense of security, specifically in those who enforce it, that all components of the system work in accordance with the plan. However, discipline is counterproductive when its use is inappropriate, unjustifiable, and inequitable—the discipline gap. African American high school students received discipline in disproportionate amounts in schools more than all other racial and ethnic group students across the nation (Gregory et al., 2010). White, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and other racial and ethnic group high school students in the United States receive fewer disciplinary actions, especially suspensions and expulsions (punitive measures) than African Americans. This disciplinary gap is a considerable indication that something is defective and in need of addressment. African American students who find themselves frequent recipients of discipline, especially when neither warranted nor

fair, are more likely to disengage from academics and school related affairs. The disengagement from these affairs—friends, peers, classes, grades, schoolwork, and teachers, administrators, and school personnel—further provides the potential for lessening their connectedness to all aspects of their education. Research conducted by persons both within and outside the field of education identified that discipline measures taken toward African American high school students were more punitive measures, suspensions and expulsions (Gregory et al., 2010).

Suspensions and expulsions are forms of discipline that few students receive within their educational experience; however, if a student is an African American, they are more likely to receive either one or both discipline measures during their high school experience than their peers. A study conducted by Haight, Kayama, and Gibson (2016) noted that out-of-school suspensions for African American students was three-times more likely than for White students, and African American students did not have a higher rate of involvement in behaviors that led to out-of-school suspensions than other racial or ethnic student groups. This statistic reflects a staggering rate and presents implications that extend and affect areas beyond discipline measures and approaches used within school, especially secondary, settings. Furthermore, individuals should pause to question what these discipline measures truly entail for African Americans. The questions might include why were suspensions and expulsions necessary; what offenses warrant such consequences; and what affects—long and short term—do these disciplinary measures have upon the present and future academic, social, and emotional characteristics of these African American students, their families, the school, the school system, and society as a

whole. One possible discipline policy or measure that school systems throughout the United States employ is “Zero Tolerance,” and this policy is a source of some of the disparities that exist for African American students.

Zero tolerance, whether viewed from a logical semantics (sense and reference) or a lexical semantics (analysis of the word meaning), is a phrase that has deep and detrimental implications within and outside of the field of education, especially for those students that are injured parties of such policies and procedures. Data reported by the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (2014) noted that Black students during the 2011-2012 schoolyear comprised 16% of students; however, they represented 32 – 42 % of students suspended or expelled (p. 6). These statistics represent some of the manifestations of the application of zero tolerance with respect to African American students within the nation. Zero tolerance is a discipline policy that issues punishment—punitive measures—for a list of defined offenses that vary amongst schools and states in the United States. The offenders (students) frequently receive consequences that range from in-school suspension and seclusion to criminal prosecution, especially when the limit of offenses is reached by the offender (student). Punitive discipline measures, including zero tolerance, contribute significantly to the disparities that exist amongst African American high school students and their counterparts. However to promote and institute effective interventions, policies such as zero tolerance and other disciplinary practices need reexamining to ensure equitable, justifiable, and appropriate measures are being taken toward all students, especially African Americans in high school. When policies such as zero tolerance are in place, chasms more so than gaps form amongst

African American high school students, parents, peers, schools, teachers, and administrators; learning, achievement, high school completion (graduation) rates, positive educational experiences, and matriculation into higher education; a decrease in incarceration rates for African Americans; and improvements in relationships between the African American community and the systems of education and government. Consequently, positive relationships based upon trust and respect can form if and when restorative practices begin to replace destructive practices.

Restorative justice has foundations in the criminal justice system and is used as a means of mediation and restoration between victims and offenders; however, restorative justice has modified applications in the field of education where it is on the rise. Restorative justice was more concerned with relationships between people rather than with identifying actions as “right” or “wrong” (Schiff, 2018). Due to the practice’s focus on relationships, it is a logical practice for application within schools because school systems are based on relationships between people. When used in schools, restorative practices have the potential to bridge gaps that exist among people, policies, practices, and systems. In the educational system, restorative justice aims to “restore” the negative affects and effects students, families, educators, school systems, and society experience as a result of punitive discipline practices, such as zero tolerance.

The use of zero tolerance policies in schools, especially high schools, have been instrumental in crippling vital relationships for African American students across this country due to its reliance on punitive discipline measures. Subsequently, the Obama administration—Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arnie

Duncan—too had identified that zero tolerance practices had led to disproportionalities in use as it specifically pertained to African American students (Robbins, 2014). From the point of view of policy makers, the consequences of zero tolerance policies do not always appear to be necessary or objectively based, which leads to more equitable measures in terms of consequences. Rather, the consequences that result from these policies are recurrently subjective and unequal in distribution, principally when addressing infractions by African American students. Disparities are influential when considering the effects of zero tolerance on indicators such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Most disturbing of the aftereffects of zero tolerance policies on African American high school is the pipeline to prison and the educational pipeline that is created from this practice. Porter (2015) noted that schools had placed too much emphasis upon policing students, and this practice denied many African American students the opportunity for an education, which in many cases led to prison rather than graduation. Each of these concerns has a damaging effect on African American youth and adults' view of those with whom they are or might join in relationship—schools; educators and school personnel; social service providers; all aspects of the criminal justice field, including police, attorneys, and judges; and the whole of society. Zero tolerance is one of several instituted practices that affect the success—academic, emotional, social, mental, and physical well-being—of African American high school students. Accordingly, some African American high school students have the strength to withstand and/or recover from the effects of any external or internal forces that infringe upon their well-being despite whether restorative measures are in place during their high school experience.

**Resilience and resistance: The power to survive.** Life can be challenging for various reasons for different people. However, for African American high school students, challenges can sometimes be insurmountable and even detrimental; unless, the student possesses or has access to some type of resilience to adversity. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, made it his personal mission during his terms in office to identify what structures and practices best supported urban educational systems and students, specifically African Americans who these institutions most often serviced (Lipman, 2015). It is not unknown to most citizens of the United States that urban education (educational institutions) underperform when compared to rural and suburban education (educational institutions), specifically in the areas of graduation, high stakes testing, and matriculation into postsecondary institutions. Yet, fewer citizens take the time to consider the life situations and extenuating circumstances that have relevance to such measurable outcomes previously stated that compare African American and non-African American high school students. The life circumstances—community and home—and mitigating situations that African American high school students encounter have an influential effect on them. This effect has the potential to imprint negatively or positively on these students' perspective of education as well as their outlook on life.

For some African American high school students, life is positive or at the least they choose to maintain a positive perspective despite circumstances and situations that negatively impact their world—home, community, and school. For some, life is perceived from a negative perspective. According to Fedders (2018), factors such as low socioeconomic status, low-level parental education attainment, school culture, and

(school) ability grouping attributed significantly to disadvantaged students' chances for success in school. Each of these factors play a significant role in how well an African American high school student adapts to, functions within, interacts with, and progresses through their respective school community—people, academics, and other systems. Not all high schools in the U.S., whether due to budgetary, staffing, or philosophical reasons, are organized to counter these possibly overwhelmingly negative factors for some African American high school students, more specifically those African American high school students who choose not to attain success despite the odds.

Furthermore, some high school environments elect not to encourage or promote opportunities for success for African American students who encounter the potentially negative factors. Fedders (2018) noted that instances of fighting against disadvantages and marginalization rarely occurred in schools with high populations of minorities. In such instances, the likelihood for these students to turn in the direction of wrong choices and destructive actions increases exponentially. Consequently, one such constructive aspect that can significantly aid African American high school students in addressing and potentially diminishing the influence of said factors is relationships. More pointedly, caring relationships between teachers, administrators, and parents working together on behalf of African American high school students' success. African American high school students do not have the sole power to change their home, school, or community. Nevertheless, through collective efforts and caring relationships, positive offsets can be forged to resist the negative and potentially negative influences on African American high school students' perspective, experience, and success in school.

**African American students' perception of caring in the school environment:**

**The art of becoming known.** Due to circumstances, situations, and environments in which many African American youth are born, raised, and both experience and come to understand the world for the first time and thereafter, African American students can have a tainted or jaded perception of what it means to care and be cared for (to be in relationship with another) in any setting, including high school. Development for urban youth could be a tumultuous time, especially when one considered the cultural contexts and other barriers that interfered with successful development (Bogar, Young, Woodruff, Beyer, Mitchell, & Johnson, 2018; Martinen, Fredrick III, Johnston, Phillips, & Patterson, 2020). African American high school students have a more difficult time navigating the ins-and-outs of becoming, developing, and interacting. In consideration of this situation, the forming and development of relationships with and amongst African American high school students and their same and different racial and ethnic peers and their teachers, administrators, and other school personnel become a process that is not as simple as many might deem it to be for African American high school students. Due to these circumstances, some African American high school students have a more difficult time in identifying when a teacher is being authentic—truly caring—about their overall well-being and not just seeing them as an individual for whom the teacher has been given charge over for some predetermined duration.

Persons—young or old, European American or African American, rich or poor—conceive relationships as an integral part of their school experience as well as life experience. Bulanda et al. (2015) identified that African American youth need assistance



in developing and forming relationships inside and outside of the school environment, and effective after-school programs aided in this process. An African American student who is encountering trouble—academic, social, and emotional—inside or outside of the school setting is less likely to seek out support from some adult in the school setting. This happens because of the lack of understanding, trust, and authenticity perceived by African American students concerning their interactions with teachers and other school personnel. Consequently, African American students must gain the necessary assistance in developing and becoming individuals who can connect with adults in the school setting, and after-school programs seem to meet the need for some of these students.

After-school programs on the high school level include clubs centered-on race and ethnicity, interests and hobbies, equity and justice, and social and academic components. “Stand Up Help Out” (SUHO) was sponsored by licensed clinical social workers and masters in social work students who applied basic principles of social work to address the needs of African American high school aged students from 2006 to 2007 (Bulanda et al., 2015). SUHO, an after-school program, had such an impact that it fostered mentoring opportunities for the sponsors and sponsoring organization (Bulanda et al., 2015). School staff and outside agencies or organizations could sponsor afterschool programs and clubs. Although, when someone associated with the school is present or a part of the program or club, the potential for students to break down the barriers that exist within the traditional day-to-day settings with this person—teacher, administrator, or staff—is more probable. Furthermore, not only do these programs offer the opportunity for African American high school students to develop better and more

authentic relationships with adults but also with their peers. Even when a club or program has a focus upon one specific subgroup of the school or population within society, the group is more often inclusive rather than exclusive. This means that students who do not fall within the group's identifier(s) are not prohibited from participating or joining, and the club or organization does not intentionally make that individual feel alienated or uncomfortable while interacting with the other participants. The time students spend in a club or program outside of the traditional classroom setting and/or after-school does not compare to the average amount of time available in which a caring teacher-student relationship can develop for them. Evidentially, African American high school students just as other racial and ethnic high school students want to be "visible," want to be known by, and want to be in caring relationships with their teachers.

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 offers a review of the literature related to and associated with the research problem. It begins with an introduction to the conceptual framework that informs the study's design for this study: Nodding's (2013) ethics of care. It addresses the relevant concepts of relational or feminine care; one-caring and cared-for; the ethics of care; and the ethics of care and schooling. It moves on to address relevant research that formed the foundation for the research undertaken in this study. The research literature was presented around four key themes: caring in the classroom; culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy and practices; teacher characteristics and practices with ethnically diverse and high-need student populations; and African American high school students.

The caring in the classroom theme noted that while school settings are not naturally structured as environments that foster or promote caring between teachers and students, exceptional teachers can make conscious efforts to care for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Culturally responsive teaching, teachers, and relevant pedagogy/pedagogical practices were identified as doing a service for all student populations (Cholewa et al., 2012). Research related to caring, lack of caring, and teacher practices affecting African American high school students identified ways that educational institutions and teachers promote and create caring environments for and with African American high school students (Akua, 2020). The final theme addressed the population focus of this study African American high school students. Research threads addressed teacher and school leaders' perceptions of students as members of society (Watson, 2019); how African American students connect, transition, and create a sense of belonging within the school setting with teachers, peers, and self (Anderson et al., 2019; Wentzel et al., 2018); the existing and ever-widening achievement and discipline gap between African American high school students and other ethnic and racial minority and White high school students (Husser, et al, 2020); how African American high school students show resilience and resistance to the (potentially and) damaging statistics that overshadow their success (Fedders, 2018). Chapter 2 concludes with considerations of African American students' perception of caring in the school environment thus tying together the conceptual framework and the literature review and offering the connective transition to the study and the focus on methodology in the next chapter.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research problem, the questions, and methodological approach I will take in this study. I will share the rationale and the logic behind the procedures. I will and present the data collection instruments and participant recruitment process. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the practices that will be employed that contribute to trustworthiness and adhere to the ethical management of all aspects of the research study.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to inform and enhance the body of literature concerning African American high school students and their caring relationships with teachers. Noddings (2013a) noted that schools were in a “crisis of caring” (p. 181). Consequently, this study was an exploration of what African American high school students’ lived experience were of a caring teacher. In view of my intentions for the study and what I explored, I determined that the most suitable research design was narrative inquiry in the style of portraiture. Portraiture was fitting because it served the goal of the study, which was to provide African American high school students a forum through which to share their stories and let their voices be heard as to what defined a caring teacher for them. Those for whom this study was important included the following: African American high school students and their families, high school teachers, high school administrators, and educational professionals. On a secondary level, those for whom this study may have significance includes school boards; educational and other policymakers; and non-high school level teachers and administrators. Most importantly, the intent of the study was to affect positive social change by understanding the dynamics of caring teacher-student relationships, bridging the gap between African American high school students and their teachers, and fostering opportunities for caring relationships in schools. To execute the study, carry out the purpose, and achieve the goals, I had to follow certain additional procedures that are discussed in Chapter 3: Research Method.

Chapter 3 comprises an examination of the research design and the reason for selecting the specific design; the role that I took throughout the research study's processes; and the methodology that I employed in answering the research question, including the logic used in the procedures and what type of data collection instruments aided in the research, whether designed by me or some other entity. After I obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval number 11-28-16-0023790), I was able to recruit five African American high school students and their supporting adults—administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher—as research participants and collect data by conducting semistructured interviews. Each of the research undertakings was conducted within the parameters of trustworthiness and adherence to the ethical management of all aspects of the research study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

#### **Research Question**

In alignment with the research problem and purpose of the study, one broad open-ended research question was posed in order to focus the study and at the same time remain open to what would emerge from the data (see Bogden & Biklen, 2007). The central research question that guided the study, specifically data collection and analysis was as follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

The research question provided the opportunity to explore the central phenomenon of the study with the possibility that it would be revised as a result of the data collection and analysis.

### **Central Phenomenon**

The central phenomenon of the study was what constituted a caring teacher for African American high school students. Noddings (2013a) noted that schools were in a “crisis of caring” (p. 181). The voices of African American high school students were absent from the body of research literature as it pertained to what constituted a caring teacher. There was an absence of research based on the narratives of African American high school students’ experiences with teachers and relationships with teachers, specifically caring teachers. A secondary emphasis in the study was the narrative itself, the story shared by the African American high school students and their supporting adults. The supporting adults were interviewed to ascertain what they perceived as a caring teacher and a caring teacher-student relationship in large part because these persons had direct connections, including caring relationships, with the African American high school students. By interviewing these persons, their perspectives provided added dimensions to the collective voices of the students and all of the research participants. Accordingly, the research tradition that was most relevant to filling the research gap and capturing these stories was narrative inquiry, specifically narrative inquiry in the style of portraiture.

## **Research Tradition and Rationale**

Narrative inquiry permitted me to legitimate voices of the participants regarding their lived experiences in a story telling manner. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) noted that when a researcher used narrative inquiry, they assumed a particular perspective about some phenomenon. In the case of this study, the central phenomenon was what constituted a caring teacher for African American high school students. To make the voices of the African American high school students authentic, the telling of their story was essential. Furthermore, to capture their voices and tell their stories, the use of narrative inquiry was the most suited research tradition.

To create a collective voice of the phenomenon, I used narrative inquiry. While each person shared their story independently of the others, the narratives served to construct an identity of the whole group (see Armstrong, James, Conradie, & Parker, 2018). Through the sharing of their stories, each research participant aided in the creation and development of the larger story, a collection of voices. Each participant's story provided a portrait of their lived experience, while the larger collection of all of the participants' stories provided a portrait of the collective, the group.

Portraiture is a style of narrative inquiry that enabled me to merge literature, the art of written expression, education, and social science into one work or portrait. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1993), the pioneer of narrative portraiture, and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), this style of narrative allows the portraitist, the one creating the narrative, to possibly open a forum through which others became informed about and engaged in the phenomenon, potentially promoting social



transformation. One of the goals of this research study was to bring about social change. By giving African American high school students and their supporting adults a forum through which to share their experiences about what constituted a caring teacher, the body of social science research literature was expanded and enhanced. Furthermore, the voices of the research participants were legitimated. Hence, portraiture was an appropriate research tradition to facilitate the project.

### **Role of the Researcher**

For this study, my role as a researcher was that of an observer. I operated as a constructivist and permitted the participants to not only tell their story in their own voice but also coconstructed their narrative for the study (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through both my experiences and the experiences of participants and both my ideas of the phenomenon and the participants' ideas of the phenomenon, the story was crafted. The stories were their experiences to share through me to the world. As they told their stories, they crafted their story. In the role of coconstructor, I recorded, analyzed, and reported the stories of the African American high school students.

In the process of telling their story, each participant did, as a part of the narrative process, come into relationship with me. "Portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 135). It was not relationship in the most common sense of the concept, word, or term. Rather, it was a relationship that existed between researcher and participant. As the individual stories were told, both the participants and I interacted and connected as meaning was created through validation checks throughout two research processes, data collection and

analysis of the data. It was a relationship in which I respected the participant ethically and allowed them to share their story authentically. No known connections existed between the participants and me. I did not have any connection with the participants or the institution. My only connection was that I am an educator and presently an English teacher at a public, urban high school, and my student population is predominantly African American. Lastly, no relationships of any kind existed amongst the participants, high school, or district and me prior to the research study. The high school at which I teach was not a part of the district in which the research participants attended school nor associated with the supporting adults.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection Rationale**

The participants in this study were five African American high school students and their supporting adults, administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher, at a high school in an urban city situated in the Midwest region of the United States. In a narrative study, Creswell (2013) suggested using “one or two individuals, unless a larger pool of participants is used to develop a collective story” (p. 126). I deemed that four to five participants were needed in order to capture a rich, collective story and identify patterns that emerged across the stories. Additionally, this number of participants was needed potentially to reach saturation of themes and redundancy of ideas (Maxwell, 2013). There was one site for the present study because it was my intent to obtain an interrelated yet diverse participant perspective from students at one high school in an urban city in the Midwest region of the United States.

To facilitate the greatest probability of this happening, I employed a purposive sampling method in selecting participants, which entailed the following sampling strategies: intensity, criterion, and theory-based. Intensity sampling meant that the participants “intensely” represented the phenomenon; “criterion” sampling provided an opportunity for me to understand that some stories might represent weaknesses to be improved; and “theory-based” sampling allowed me to view the phenomenon within a theoretical construct, the theory of ethics of care (see Patton, 2014). The purposively selected student research participants met the following requirements: (a) African American; (b) high school student currently enrolled in either one of the high school Grade classifications: 9, 10, 11, or 12; (c) attended the same high school; and (d) had a parent/guardian who was willing to participate in the study, unless the student was 18 years of age or older. The other supporting adults—teacher(s) and administrator(s)—were selected in relation to the student, that is, a classroom teacher, dean, or principal. Information, such as demographics about each student participant, was verified with the school’s database. The instrumentation and data collection tools were designed by me and were not in part or whole associated with any published or unpublished devised instrumentation or data collection tool.

## **Instrumentation**

### **Data Collection**

This qualitative narrative study employed the following methodological approach in obtaining data. My interview procedure was informed by multiple approaches including informal conversational interviews, interview protocols, and standardized open-

ended interviews (see Patton, 2014). Each participant took part in two interview phases. In the first phase, I asked the central interview question: “What are the experiences of African American students in this school?” To obtain richer interview data that addressed the participants’ experiences with caring teachers for African American high school students, I followed the four interview protocols, which were designed for each participant group and provided more direct questioning (see Appendices A, B, C, & D). The interview protocols utilized questions that I designed myself and aligned with the central research question. During the interview, if the participant was possibly uncertain with their response or paused for an extended length of time, I utilized the interview protocol rationale, which I designed, to prompt a more direct response (see Appendix E). After in-depth analyses, I crafted the stories from the verbatim transcript obtained through the face-to-face interview (first phase). These stories reflected each participant’s responses to their group’s interview protocol.

During the second interview phase, if the participants elected, they could read their interview transcript. For this phase, the participants were able to provide clarifications, retractions, and additions to their first phase (initial) interview responses (see Maxwell, 2013). The first phase was conducted with each participant. While, the second phase was extended to each participant. Consequently, the second interview phase did not result in any changes to the stories crafted from the initial (first) interview phase.

According to Clandinin (2013), in narrative inquiry, the process of crafting the story included: “living,” “telling,” “retelling,” and “reliving.” Narrative inquiry requires

a researcher to provide a written story, the narrative, which is different from the oral story, the interview or the spoken. During the face-to-face interview, I captured the living and lived experience of the research participants as told from them to me. In the telling phase, the research participants willingly opened themselves to share their lived phenomenon with me. As a result of the oral telling and recording, I transcribed the story into a narrative draft. As I drafted and crafted the story of the lived phenomenon, I exercised the art of retelling while, at the same time, I maintained authenticity and trustworthiness. In the retelling of the story, I employed literary and writing techniques used in the humanities. When I shared the retelling of the lived phenomenon both the participants and I, as the researcher, experienced the reliving of the shared experiences.

In a narrative study as in other qualitative studies, data are collected, analyzed, and the story unfolds throughout the process. As recommended by Creswell (2013), I engaged in the following steps: devised a “start list”—a list devised prior to conducting research and includes terminology, words, and descriptors used in the research literature based upon the researcher’s directly and indirectly lived knowledge of the research phenomenon (this list in some ways resembles a hypothesis); managed the data—in handwritten field notebooks/journals, computer programs, namely, Word documents, and audio tape recordings; read and memoed—audio tape recordings became written transcripts, additional reading of the transcripts occurred, and coding continued; described—the story shared by the participants was read to identify chronological sequence and for the purpose of relaying the stories shared; classified—further meaning was made of the stories shared, connections made, and significances identified;

interpreted—the individual stories were explored as well as the collective stories; and represented and visualized—the shared stories reflected a collective voice as well as individual voices on the given research phenomenon.

Throughout the data collection and analyzation processes, I created several drafts of the stories. I maintained trustworthiness by consistently verifying the original data collected from the face-to-face interview transcripts with the stories being created. The accuracy of the participants' words and experiences resulted in the cocreation of each individual participants' story as well as the collective story of all of the participants from the data collected. In addition to the above-mentioned data analysis and interpretation processes, I employed methods used in literature and creative writing—margin note taking, made metaphors, and noted patterns and themes throughout the data analysis. By incorporating each of these steps, I maintained that this collective story was accurate and complete.

The interviews, conducted over a 10 month period, lasted for approximately one-and-one-half hours and involved one sitting to obtain the initial interview responses. Patton (2014) shared a parable to impress these components upon the researcher: “Go forth now and question. Ask and listen. The world is just beginning to open up to you. Each person you question can take you into a new part of the world” (p. 340). An effective and long-standing approach to gathering information for a narrative is through interviewing (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1993). Two components, speaking (or questioning) and listening, comprised each interview. In preparation for and during interviews, recommended measures were put in place to ensure that ethical and validity concerns

were addressed before going into the world to ask and listen. The time between the two phases of interviewing that each participant arranged was from one-and-a-half months to three-months depending on the participant's schedule and availability.

Before I began any form of interviewing, I obtained a letter of cooperation from the institution where the research participants were students, employees, or otherwise connected. Next, I obtained official approval through the Walden University IRB to conduct research in a school setting and with individuals (research participants) under 18 and over 18 years of age. I then needed to obtain the parental written consent and a student assent from/for the research participants (under 18). Once I obtained each of the above approvals, consents, and assents, I began the data collection process by conducting the interviews. Ultimately, interviews were the method of data collection for this study. Interviews were semistructured, and this permitted the use of an interview protocol, generated open-ended narrative responses, and allowed for new and more probing questions to be asked if needed to ensure complete responses. Following data collection, I began the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis**

Once participant responses were collected through semistructured interviews, the data analysis process began by creating a chronological ordering of the initial stories told by the participants. This process is what Creswell called "restorying" (2013). In the process of restorying, I constructed individual participant stories based upon the data collected in the initial interview. The research participant was then invited to read the constructed story and provide further insight, corrections, or clarifications. These were

then referenced as I reconstructed the original story. This process ensured that the most accurate and complete story was told for each participant and involved inductive analysis.

The next step in the data analysis process was to take the stories of each participant and form a collective story that incorporated the common themes across all of the stories. To complete this step I employed inductive analysis and used pattern and theme creation to identify where coding overlapped and stories aligned. Qualitative research is based upon an inductive logic premise, which invites the researcher to find emergent themes and patterns from the collected data (Hatch, 2002). In this approach, various types of evidence are merged to form a whole. In the creation of the portraits, I took the stories of each participant to create the whole story of the lived, collective experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults. It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this process which can distort responses, which may result from interviewer bias, recall error, and interviewee reaction during the interview (see Patton, 2014). In qualitative research, the researcher or portraitist should work to create a complete picture. However, it is difficult to provide a complete picture of any occurrence, experience, event, or happening due to the nature of being human and considering how the mind functions. Triangulation among participant responses (student, parent/guardian, and teacher/administrator) was the strategy I used to minimize and address these limitations.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Approaches employed in the present study to address quality and trustworthiness included collecting rich data, member checking, and triangulation. As noted previously,



research participants were invited to read their interview transcripts and amend their responses after their interview session to ensure accuracy and completeness (see Maxwell, 2013). My knowledge of the context and the issues allowed me to collect rich data due to the participants' increased comfort level with me. Moreover, rich data was collected as a result of the participants' willingness to share their stories. Respondent validation strategies provided an opportunity for me to obtain the most complete and accurate data depicting the participants' experiences with member checking and triangulation used to maintain quality and trustworthiness.

### **Issues of Ethics**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness, credibility, and authenticity are central to ethical practices (Creswell, 2013). To uphold ethical practices I ensured that the IRB, informed consent and assent forms, confidentiality, and privacy were clearly referenced. Further, I maintained a high level of awareness regarding any controversy, sensitive issues, conflict of interest, or researcher bias that arose throughout any interactions with study participants. Another way that I ensured ethical practices were upheld was by securely maintaining and protecting all research associated documents inclusive of: IRB related documents and files (application, consent and assent forms); interview files and documents (such as recordings and transcripts, analyzed data, portrait narratives); and all other participant related confidential materials were kept on a personal desktop computer hard drive and/or external hard drive with password protected access. In a study conducted by Aguinis and Solarino (2019), one implication for future research noted that a way to enhance qualitative studies was for a researcher to document their interactions

with participants. In so taking the previously mentioned measures, I maintained ethical practices by being transparent with the research participants prior to and during data collection and during and after data analysis.

Researchers need to remain flexible and open to follow any spontaneous direction emerging from the interaction between researcher and participant (Patton, 2014). I began the interview process using an interview protocol that offered a more structured approach to collecting spoken data. I introduced the interview protocol that was relevant for the research participant (see Appendices A, B C, & D). The protocol provided a list of interview questions and ensured that I asked the relevant questions in order and with consistency of wording for each participant. Using a guide (or protocol) offers researchers better control over the amount of time they spend with participants, the ability to determine which information is needed for further inquiry, and the level of detail needed before reentering the field (Patton, 2014). Through the use of a semistructured interview, not only was I able to obtain specific interview responses, but also I was able to obtain additional data that were participant relevant, rich, and meaningful in the processes of analysis, theme identification, and coding—cocreation of the portrait narratives.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I discussed why the narrative inquiry in the style of portraiture was the best method for exploring the research questions identified in my study. The research participants, five African American high school students and their supporting adults, were selected by purposive methods and met certain criteria for selection and

participation. The stories of the lived experiences of the participants in relation to the phenomenon were collected through semistructured interviews that employed an interview protocol designed by me. Triangulation was a major source of validation of the data. Member checking was another approach used to ensure trustworthiness. Trustworthiness was enhanced during the research process through a combination of rich data collection, member checking, and triangulation. The research procedures were conducted according to guidelines approved by Walden's IRB and intended to foster an ethical exploration of the lived experiences of African American high school students and their supporting adults with caring teachers.

In Chapter 4: Results, I will present the findings of the study. The voices of the 15 participants will be heard through my retelling, serving in the combined roles of researcher, coauthor and portraitist. In the unfolding of the next chapter I offer a multilayered artistic presentation of the data as I have painted a participant portrait for the observer (visual art), told their story for the listener (spoken art) or reader (written art) to provide glimpses into their view of caring teachers for African American high school students. I have also offered commonalities, differences, and intersections (artistic explorations) of the results of the lived experiences of what defined a caring teacher in each participant's portrait narratives.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to inform and enhance the body of literature concerning African American high school students and their caring relationships with teachers. The central research question was as follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

The central research question was best suited to capture the lived experiences of the research participants (administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students) at Running Water High School (pseudonym).

### **Setting and Demographics**

#### **Participants**

Fifteen participants from Running Water High School volunteered to be a part of this study (see Table 1). They included two administrators (one African American male principal and one White female social worker), two African American parents (a stepfather and a mother), six teachers (one Hispanic male, one White male, two African American males, and two White females), and five African American high school students (a female sophomore and four seniors, two male and two female). Each of the fifteen participants contributed a unique perspective to the study.

Table 1

*Profiles of the Four Participant Groups*

Name (pseudonym)	Participant group	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Madge Michaels	Administrator	Female	White
Kennedy Moonlight	Administrator	Male	African American
Rogelio Bloom	Parent/Guardian	Male	African American
Camilla Jones	Parent/Guardian	Female	African American
Jules Fieldcrest	Teacher	Female	White
Kyla Smithson	Teacher	Female	White
Howard Delaware	Teacher	Male	African American
Steve Limmerick	Teacher	Male	African American
Ryan Setter	Teacher	Male	Hispanic/White
Spenser Ombre	Teacher	Male	White
Amelia Brudleberry	Student	Female	African American
Nathaniel Bavaldi	Student	Male	African American
Levi Mathens	Student	Male	African American
Hope Springs	Student	Female	African American
Paris Journey	Student	Female	African American

Each of the five African American high school student participants were enrolled in general education and honors courses throughout the course of their high school career. These participants were involved in extracurricular activities throughout high school that included athletic, academic, performing arts, and student government organizations. Two of the teachers worked with students with special needs. Two teachers worked with students in alternative classroom settings in the high school. Two teachers worked with general education and advanced education students. Lengths of teaching experience ranged from 3 to beyond 15 years. The administrators had the ability to reach students in ways that extended beyond that of their classroom teachers. The administrators were able to do this because in their professional roles they had the opportunity to interact with all students in the high school at any time during the school day, whereas, the classroom teachers were only able to interact with the students who were assigned to their courses at a specified time during the school day.

### **Running Water High School**

The site (cooperating educational institution) for this research study was Running Water High School. It is located in the Midwest region of the United States. The high school is situated on the outskirts of Running Water city limits and is surrounded by several residential neighborhoods and locally owned shops and restaurants. Running Water High School had undergone major structural and esthetic renovations and improvements during the 2017-2018 school year, is classified as a secondary school, and offers courses that meet the needs of all its learners, including classes for those with special needs, advanced placement (AP), dual credit, and career and college readiness

courses. The high school also awards general, academic honors, and technical honors diplomas to its graduates. The high school services students enrolled in Grades 9 through 12. This high school enrolls more than 1,500 students but fewer than 1,800 students annually.

The student population is predominately White. African American/Black students represent roughly 25% of the student population. Regardless of racial background or ethnicity, the Running Water Community (pseudonym) is populated by a majority of working class and disadvantaged individuals. Of the total population, close to 75% of the student body receive either free or reduced federal lunch services. This demographic information is provided to describe the reality and context experienced by all students, both those who participated in the study and those who did not participate in the study. To fully understand the rich narratives provided by each of the research participants, it is important to consider all aspects of their high school experience and context.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis: Creating Participant Portraits**

Each of the 15 participants shared their lived experiences in response to the central research question. The average length of time for interviews informing the participant group portraits were as follows: 34.7 minutes for administrators, 39.9 minutes for parents/guardians, 40.1 minutes for teachers, and 26.5 minutes for students. The transcript from each research participant's interview was analyzed and fashioned into a portrait narrative using the narrative inquiry qualitative research method, which incorporated the direct quotations from each research participant; this was one approach

noted in the research of Creswell and Poth (see 2018) to employ when using an interpretive approach, such as narrative.

To provide clarity when referencing participants, certain words, idiomatic expressions, and bracketed clarifications were added to the text where needed in the portrait narratives. Pseudonyms were ascribed to each participant in the research study. The pseudonyms were created by me for each participant and bore no known semblance to the names of research participants or any other consciously known individuals. The same was true for pseudonyms assigned to the high school and school district, cities and states, and other educational and noneducational entities, including national and local assessments, clubs, organizations, or other related elements in this study. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research study and continued throughout the presentation of their experiences in the portrait narratives and elsewhere in this study.

Ultimately, each participant interview was fashioned into a personal narrative or portrait. According to the seminal theorist of the portraiture methodology Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), crafting effective narratives involves considering two guiding questions: “How does the interpretation that I am mounting make sense of (lend coherence to) the various parts of my experience of the subject or site?,” and “How true to my overall vision of the whole is the representation that I have constructed in the final portrait[s]?” (p. 262). Beginning with 10 to 20 pages of interview transcripts for each participant, 15 three- to five-page personal narratives were constructed from the roughly 300 pages of transcripts. The flow of the narratives, drawn directly from the individual interviews, was appropriately influenced by the interview questions and the insights of



each participant. The resulting narratives were combined to create portraits of each participant in each of the four participant groups. Through their shared experiences, each participant willingly communicated an insightful narrative portrait of what represented a caring teacher for African American high school students. These narrative portraits not only reflected what caring teachers for African American high school students meant for the students but also what it meant to the other 10 study participants. Taken together, the participant responses revealed patterns of commonality and intersection that further illuminated the study.

The central research question that guided the study, specifically data collection and analysis, was as follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

The central research question in concert with the interview questions (see Appendices A through D) for each of the four participant groups afforded me the opportunity to foster artistry and promote individual voice within the portraiture frame work (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 100). It is likely that the narrative portraits that were created from each participant interview were influenced by both the central research question and the interview questions. Not only did the responses provided by the participants reflect the information that was needed to craft the narrative portraits, but also the nature of the questions provided a rich and personal insight into each participant's perspective on a caring teacher for African American high school students.

Consequently, each participant responded to questions that were similar to the other participant groups. The similarity in the questions was intentional so that each participant group would have responses that could be comparative. However, each participant was given the freedom to share their personal perspective, interpretation, and application to the lived phenomenon of what constitutes a caring teacher for African American high school students, which was the study's contextual focus. Each participant provided any clarifications during and following their interview, which provided another layer of trustworthiness. Through triangulation of the data, diverse voices—administrators, parents, teachers, and students—speaking on the phenomenon were further analyzed to identify common and individual themes and patterns for narrative analysis (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The culmination of their shared experiences were the narrative portraits.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In this study, the 15 narrative portraits were of three supporting adult groups for African American high school students: administrators, parents, and teachers; and the fourth group, African American high school students. Each of the participant groups were directly connected to Running Water High School. The two administrators were identified in the Running Water School District (pseudonym) as educational leaders at the high school and members of the administrative team. Of the two parents in the study, the paternal relationship existed by way of marriage, and the maternal relationship existed by a biological connection. Both parents were involved in their student's high school experience, but the degree of involvement differed between the two. Six teachers with

varying lengths of experience and various disciplines of expertise elected to be a part of the study. All the teachers were classified as classroom teachers; however, some of the teachers served in roles that were auxiliary to their role in the classroom. The last participant group were the students. Each participant of this group was an African American high school student enrolled at Running Water High School in either the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade. These students were involved in a variety of activities in and outside of the high school with academic and nonacademic association. The responses to the interview questions by each participant provided the data from which the narrative portraits were crafted for this qualitative narrative portraiture study.

In the artistic style of portraiture, “the portraitist searches for the overarching vision . . . that will give the narrative focus and meaning” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 248). Hence, I found that the most befitting manor to discuss the central research question was in the following order: administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students. This ordering modeled from my perspective both as an educator and the researcher of the study the degrees of separation from the central research for each of the participant groups. Essentially, I intend to take the reader on a journey of exploration that begins further away from the primary focus of the study—African American high school students—and draws them closer to the focus of the study as the narrative portraits progress. Each participant’s portrait in the participant groups were conveyed in the order that the interviews were conducted; no preferential or predetermined method was employed to the presentation. Lastly, the title of each participant’s narrative portrait was devised from the overall theme that emerged from the interview transcript. Specifically,

the pervading sentiment that was directly or indirectly communicated to me (“spoke to me”) by the research participant following the many analyses of the data became their narrative’s identifier.

### **Results: The Administrator Portraits**

Two key administrators at Running Water High School participated in this research study (see Table 2). These two administrators were the only administrators that elected to be a part of the purposive study. However, both administrators had significant experiences serving African American high school students in some capacity at the high school. It is possible that other administrators at Running Water High School did not believe that they had any contributions to make to the focus of the study, did not believe that they had sufficient experiences in their interaction with African American high school students, or did not want to be a part of the research study. Ms. Michaels was the Running Water High School social worker, and she worked with the social-emotional-affective aspects of students’ needs. Mr. Moonlight was the Running Water High School principal, and both administrators handled and oversaw the day-to-day operations of the building, faculty, staff, and student-body as well as the disciplinary aspects and other measures of students’ needs. Both administrators believed that all teachers at Running Water High School served the African American student population with the same amount of care and at the same level of intensity and rigor as they did the other ethnic and racial student populations at Running Water High School.

Table 2

*Profiles of Administrator Participants*

Name	Role/position	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Madge Michaels	Social worker	Female	White
Kennedy	Principal	Male	African American
Moonlight			

For the sole objective of crafting both an authentic and characterizing narrative for each administrator participant, a systematic review was conducted of the 15 administrator interview questions in the *Administrator Interview Protocol* (see Appendix D). The review was conducted to establish the order by which to incorporate each administrator's response to each of the 15 interview questions and shape the responses into a personal narrative that explored their perspective(s) about caring teachers for African American high school students. After reviewing the interview questions and the administrator responses to each interview question, the narratives were crafted following the order of the interview questions. While order, flow, and participant voice were maintained in the condensing of the administrator narratives, the interview question responses were combined to provide clarity and depth to create and convey their lived experiences. To create the most authentic portrait of each administrator as well as adhere to the tenets of the narrative methodology, only direct quotations extracted from the interview question responses were used to create each portrait narrative.

The crafting of each participant's portrait narrative involved the combining of responses from the interview questions according to focus. Beginning with a focus on teachers, responses that emphasized positive experiences were obtained from question one and two and responses that emphasized negative experiences were obtained from question three. Interview question four, five, six, and nine responses revealed the administrators' perspectives on caring teachers, while question 10, 11, and 14 prompted their perspectives on noncaring teachers. At this point, the portrait narrative shifted focus from the teachers to the (African American high school) students building from responses to question seven, eight, 12, and 13 that addressed both the positive and negative aspects of how students feel, act, and perform both with caring and noncaring teachers in the classroom. The personal narrative concluded with the administrator's summary or closing insights from interview question 15.

**Ms. Michaels' Portrait: We Bridge Gaps and Create Strong Relationships**

Here at our school, I think we have a faculty and staff that do an amazing job with students who [the faculty and staff] are not only concerned about them [students] academically, but as well as we have a very diverse population, and they come alongside them to help them in a lot of different ways as well. They [teachers who work with African American high school students] go above-and-beyond I feel like to meet students kind of where they are. [A] lot of the students we work with have factors that are going on outside of school, and they do a really good job of understanding [the outside of school factors] and really meeting them where they are. You know sometimes things are said, comments have been

made, and I don't think it's out of maliciousness or bad intent, but I think it's just sometimes it gets categorized in in a negative light. [Teachers and staff use] a grouping term . . . 'those people' [when referring to African Americans and African American high school students]. Their uncomfortableness with [and] lack of education [about African Americans/African American high school students] on their [teachers and staff] part [are seen as negative].

[African American high school students want to know] there is somebody who cares about them. I think care can look like a lot of different things. It can be really just building a relationship with them, and whatever that looks like but strong relationships. I know we have a lot of great teachers in this building as well that not only maybe they've had a student as a freshman or sophomore, and they've continued to stay connected with them even as they progress as a junior and a senior.

They [caring teachers for African American high school students] are warm, friendly, and smile a lot. They have a way of breaking-down those barriers with students just by even just their body language. I just think that care, concern, being open-minded, never being shocked at anything, and just that willingness to really build a relationship with them [are key characteristics in caring for African American high school students]. Positive feedback is huge and validating for what kids are feeling, and I think the teachers that have the most success are those teachers that practice those things. [Noncaring teachers for African American high school students] just sit behind their desk and are closed-off. Is it just

because it is annoying you? I would like to see the language that they use, the way that they manage the behavior in the classroom, and that type of thing be different. When kids feel tied to something, absenteeism rates go down, and we see graduations rates go up.

[T]hey [African American high school students] want to be here because they know that somebody's going to check on them, and they want that accountability—a good grade; that comes from turning-in homework and passing quizzes and tests and standardized testing. I think most of the times when a teacher is caring and working side-by-side with that student, you know walking them through that process of whatever that they might be working on that day, the students respond well to that stuff [caring and being shown care]. In a noncaring teacher's classroom, African American high school students have the 'Well if you don't care, I'm not going to care either' attitude, do not turn-in assignments, and do the bare minimal to get by. They think that they are punishing the teacher by doing that, so if there's not a good relationship going on there, they're like 'forget you; I don't need your science class!' Even though, I need that for a credit to be able to graduate. So definitely, you know you can feel negativity.

[I]n our community where our education level is low, you know, a lot of our adults in this community maybe didn't finish high school let alone go on to get a college degree. School wasn't a good place for them. Then that carries over, so, I think the school's [Running Water High School is] really trying to reach-out and bridge those gaps, and a lot of what I do is I bridge things between



the home and the school. I work a lot with parents/guardians and grandparents raising students to help them kind of navigate what that [managing school] looks like. The more that we can get them into the building, they can see, and they're going to push those students as well. Really, if we can work together with parents or guardians or who[m]ever that might be along with the school, then that [African American high school] student really does feel supported. If they [parent{s}/guardian{s}] are doing something at home that is working, we want to be able to do that same thing here at school, so, again, I think its relationship building is key. We have a lot of students that [Running Water High School] needs to be the safe haven for them. You know, this [Running Water High School] needs to be a good place for them to come, and I think that when they [African American High School students] feel that that pushes them and drives them.

**Mr. Moonlight's Portrait: Teachers Try to Make Human Connections and Educate**

[T]hey [the teachers at Running Water High School] try to connect and find out about their students' background because in the past we've done a lot of work. We want to make sure we know where our students are coming from. We try to understand their backgrounds, and we try to make sure we meet them where they are. Once they really started to study and find out about their [African American high school students'] culture and heritage, they found out that in reality they weren't trying to be negative or disrespectful in any way. [T]hey [teachers] see that [African American] student as any other student. They don't

see a person in a different light because of their skin color. They're here to help educate. She's [the Director of the Career Center] really been able to build relationships and has really connected with those students [African American high school students] where they see that they have all the resources and tools they need to complete school or graduate. I think sometimes we may not really know enough about their [African American high school students'] background and their upbringing, and so, sometimes it leads a positive situation into a negative direction very quickly because we perceive something to be negative. [These situations] stop that person from accomplishing what they could have become because we're not there to help and support them, so then they revert to the other [negative] direction.

This person [a caring teacher for African American high school students] would be a teacher who understands her students, builds relationships, or build relationships with their students. They try to find out who that student is. It's not all about whatever content area they're teaching, but it's about finding out [who] they are as a person. They are constantly helping and supporting those students and are willing to do any and everything to listen to those kids. They're always there to champion their [African American high school students'] cause. She [one caring teacher] brought them into her home, fed them, and paid for the summer camp and AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) sports team and travels. She became like a true family member to those kids even though she was Caucasian, and those [high school] kids were African American. [A noncaring teacher for African

American high school students] does not get to know their students; does not try to find out about their students' heritage or background; do not try to meet their needs; don't try to fully listen to that student; [are] quick about punishing that student for something because they really don't take the time to find out all those things that really make up who that person is; and a lot of times like [to use] the word 'Colored' [a term used by White Americans to describe Black Americans during the Jim Crow Era].

[These negative characteristics cause African American high school students to] not want to work for that teacher [and] not want to behave [for] that teacher. They hate going to that class; go to try to disrupt what's going on in that classroom; and [are] not going to succeed academically. More than likely, they're going to fail that class. They do not even try. They don't care. Behaviorally, they are constantly getting in trouble; constantly be[ing] sent to the dean; and probably being suspended, maybe even to a point of being expelled or having to go to alternative school. They [caring teachers for African American high school students] are a totally different person, and the student is at ease. They [African American high school students] will tell you anything. All of their defense mechanisms are lowered, and you're [educators are] able to have really good communication or talks with them, and so, it's a very positive like environment. It [the positive/caring environment] makes them [the African American high school students] feel good about themselves. It helps them build their self-esteem. It helps to let them know they have worth, self-worth. They feel

reassured that you know even if I would mess up there's not going to be any punitive or negative connotation or anything like that. I think [that] they [African American high school students], if they are provided with a positive environment, they do a lot better academically speaking because they're not afraid to take risks. They're not afraid to be curious to find out about whatever they may be working on, and so it helps them grow and learn as a student versus if they were in a negative environment. They're not going to take risks. They're not going to do anything out of the ordinary because they not [don't] want the negative side effect from that.

If the teacher cares, you're [the administrator] not going to have nearly as many problems or concerns that you would have if you're [an African American high school student] in a classroom where the teacher does not care [because] they're not going to care! If they have built a relationship with that teacher, they're not going to let that teacher down, and the same way, the teacher's not going to want to let their student [down], so it's a very positive environment conducive to learning. I think that if a teacher really cares about his or her students, they're going to do their background work and find out who that student is, and they are going to make certain that that student flourishes in his or her classroom because they're going to build those relationships that they know are important. You wouldn't have people saying racial slurs; people disliking another person because they belong to a different culture; and you'd have a place where everyone would respect and value you [and] one another. Students would really

focus on why they're at school to do well academically, and all those other things would fall into place [, and] you would have less of social and emotional problems. I want the [high] school where everyone cherishes [and] values every persons' culture [and] heritage. We [educators] don't see people. We don't look at them [students] and see colors. We look at them and see people that we value—their heritage and background, and we all want to learn more about one another because out of many you have one human race.

### **Results: The Parent/Guardian Portraits**

Two parents of African American high school students at Running Water High School participated in this research study (see Table 3). The two parent participants of African American high school students at Running Water High School were involved in their student's education in varying capacities and levels. Each parent participant wanted their children to be as successful in school as any other high school students.

Table 3

#### *Profiles of Parent Participants*

Name	Role	Classification	Race/ethnicity
Rogelio Bloom	Father	Stepparent	African American
Camilla Jones	Mother	Biological parent	African American

Mr. Bloom was the stepfather of Nathaniel Bavaldi, an African American student at Running Water High School and student participant in this research study. Mr. Bloom was also a dean and the head varsity football coach at Running Water High School. Ms.

Jones was the mother of Amelia Brudleberry, an African American student at Running Water High School and student participant in this research study. Both of these parents expressed that they have noticed differences in the treatment between African American students and other ethnic and racial group students at Running Water High School. For these parents of African American high school students at Running Water High School, their personal experiences as high school students had not been predominantly positive. Mr. Bloom and Ms. Jones expressed that their personal experiences in high school were the result of the American era, school integration and busing, in which they were high school students.

For the sole objective of crafting both an authentic and characterizing narrative for each parent participant, a systematic review was conducted of the 14 parent interview questions in the *Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol* (see Appendix B). The review was conducted to establish the appropriate order in which to incorporate each parent's response to each of the 14 interview questions and shape the responses into a personal narrative portrait that effectively presented their perspective(s) about caring teachers for African American high school students. After reviewing the *Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol* (see Appendix B) along with the parent responses to each interview question, the narratives were crafted in the following format. Each portrait narrative began with the discussion of interview question two, which focused on the positive experiences, followed by question three, which focused upon the negative experiences. The portrait narrative moved to presenting responses to interview question five's focus on the characteristics of a caring teacher for African American high school students followed by

responses to question six, which encouraged the parents to describe a caring teacher for African American high school students. This narrative then shifted to the discussion of how a caring teacher makes African American high school students feel (question seven) the interaction between a caring teacher and an African American high school student (question eight). To provide contrasting insight into noncaring teachers, the narrative highlighted parent's characteristics of a noncaring teacher for African American high school students (question 10) and the descriptions of a caring teacher for African American high school students (question nine). The portrait narrative continued with the parent perspective of how African American high school students feel when interacting with a noncaring teacher (question 11), followed by the advice that the parent gave to their child/student with respect interacting with teachers, whether deemed as caring or noncaring (question 13). The portrait narrative concluded with each parent providing any insight that they felt appropriate to add to the conversation (question 14).

### **Mr. Bloom's Portrait: We Have a Long Way to Go**

To be one hundred percent honest, I can't recall one situation where I would say there was a specific teacher that had a very good relationship with my son. I don't think there has been any teachers that have reached-out to me initially. I think it's always kind of been me [who reached-out]. I wouldn't say it has been negative. There have not been any kind of issues as far as a back-and-forth between me and any kind of teachers like that. It's more of an 'Okay, what do you need me to do?' because I don't really worry about blame. It's more of a 'What can we do to fix it?' I'm very much like when it comes to teachers and my

son, I'll try my best to explain to my son that there is gonna be some teachers that you click with that you get along with that you understand, and there's gonna be some ones that you don't. You're gonna have to learn how to just deal with it because it's just kind of like how life is. You know, so, he hasn't connected with any teachers as far on a personal [level]. A lot of people do not know that he's my son. We [my son and I] kind of prefer it that way. I don't want him to be mistreated [or] treated any differently, so when teachers find out he is my [Dean Bloom's] son, then maybe I might get some interaction, but before [teachers find out] I can't think of one time where a teacher initiated contact with me.

They [a caring teacher for African American high school students] would take a personal interest in the child other than what they are doing in the classroom. Some teachers don't want to [take a personal interest], and some don't know how to [take a personal interest]. They don't know how to connect. Because [I'm an educator], I have an advantage on knowing what a caring teacher does; they (a) remember the first time that they meet the student, (b) hang student work on the wall not because it's the expectation but because they are proud of the students, (c) hold conversations with the students about things that did not happen in school but outside of the school or classroom, and (d) has the fewest kids outside their [class]room [students in the hallway or at the dean or principal's office for disciplinary reasons]. I mean they [a caring teacher for African American high school students] should make 'em feel like they care about the kid not just because they are in their [the caring teacher's] class, but just because they



want to see them be successful. They [a caring teacher for African American high school students] write the fewest [discipline and/or behavioral] referrals.

I would wonder wha[t] this [noncaring] teacher [is] doing other than writing them up to try to build that [teacher/student-student/teacher] relationship. I'm not the type of teacher[/dean] that thinks the teacher wrote them up, [and] well, my kid [African American student/son] did nothing wrong, and I'm going try and defend them [my African American student/son], not necessarily. That being said, if you [a noncaring teacher for African American high school students] just keep writing them [African American high school students] up; that [is] not going to solve the problem because you got them all year. What is going to be done? They're the adult. To me, it's kind of up to them [the noncaring teacher] to take that first step, and say, 'Okay, we ain't vibing. For whatever reason, we ain't clicking.' If you [noncaring for African American high school students] leave, how many students, past and current, would care? What would change as far as day-to-day activities in that school? If you leave and you can be replaced, you probably didn't care because you didn't do anything to ingrain yourself in that system, and so, if you can be replaced, pretty simply, you're not needed.

[T]hey're [noncaring teachers of African American high school students are] the ones that come when they have to and leave when they have to leave. [W]hat dictates their day-to-day interactions is 'what do I have to do to get through this, and I [the noncaring teacher] not get fired?' Teachers who don't

recognize bias or their own biases. If you're a student in high school, and you hate the cheerleader. You just can't stand them; they're preppy and the teacher's pet. When you become a teacher, you're not going to like the cheerleaders, and, that's okay. That's being who you are. Until you can acknowledge that about yourself, you know, you're not trying to become a better teacher. You're not trying to become a better educator. You can't feel like 'it's my classroom, and I'm going to do what I want.' That's true to a point, but you might not be an effective teacher. Honestly, I don't work with them. A few teachers, I have flat-out told them, 'I kind of avoid you because you're negative; I just can't be around you.' I don't want them to start affecting my personality, my mood, and my feeling.

I tell Nathaniel [my stepson], 'You gonna have to learn how to deal with seven teachers with several different personalities. There are certain classrooms [where] you gonna have to learn how to cut-it-on and cut-it-off. Then, there are certain ones [classrooms] where you gotta learn to keep your mouth shut [because] even if you are right, you're wrong. You do not have the authority in that classroom, and if that teacher tells you this is what you have to do to get this 'A' then you do it. As long as you're not compromise[ing] yourself. That's what the smart kids do. Your 3.6 G.P.A. [Grade Point Average] isn't going to be stamped on your forehead. You look like what a lot of people would consider [a] thug; you can't help that. You won't apologize for it. You are what you are, and you need to be proud of it. Sometimes your goanna have to deal with [that] man.'

He has to learn as a man Black m[e]n are on a finite line. You know? 'We not selling-out; you are true to yourself, but you also need to get this job. You need to make sure you carry yourself in a certain kind of way in a diverse world as opposed to when you're back at home with your boys.' That's what he has to learn. It's our [African American males/Mr. Bloom and Nathaniel's] reality.

[W]e don't have any Black female teachers or administrators [at Running Water High School], so I get a lot of females who come to my office, and we talk. I can only go so far because I know what they are dealing with kind of, but I don't know what it's like to be a female. We do not have any mentoring programs; we don't have anything for Black girls. At this school [Running Water High School], African American female high school students emulate the women that they see on television [because] the school does not have a Black female teacher or administrator only a few cafeteria and custodial staff. I've not heard of a PD [Professional Development] or seminar yet to discuss the achievement gap when it comes to Black girls. I know more Black women go to college than [Black] men [who are the ones] in prison, but the African American high school students at Running Water High School] need Black role models and teachers who they can talk about things that they deal with [as African American females and males]. We have a long way to go at Running Water High School with respect to male and female African American high school students and with respect to embodying caring relationships between them and caring high school teachers [caring relationships] for them at the Running Water High School.

**Ms. Jones' Portrait: I Don't Deal with Them**

Well, to be honest, as far as the teachers go, I don't really work one-on-one with them. I know they have a service on the Internet to where we can email them back-and-forth, but I've never used that because I see where my daughter's grades are pretty much okay. At Running Water High School, I normally work with the counselor; she knows my daughter overall and dealing with the teacher is just that specific subject. The counselor's availability is awesome. We [my daughter and I] can tell her what we're looking for, and she can hit it right on the nose. She [The counselor] knows what she's talking about and what she's doing, pretty much. The teachers at Running Water High School use technology too much. I would rather see it on piece of paper, but I'm old-school.

In the classroom, [a caring] teacher for African American high school students uses discipline; [they do not permit behaviors] cause the kids are bigger [than the teacher] or [because the teacher is] scared of them [the African American high school students]. During elementary school, she had Caucasian teachers, and she had African American teachers, and they were just all so caring. Yes, it was wonderful! I mean, it was awesome. It was unbelievable, actually because I was torn between sending her to public school because of how the teachers act, sending her to Christian school, or preparatory [school] [for high school]. In junior high school, there was a teacher that influenced her [my African American daughter] and inspired her to run for student council, and she

ended-up getting it. I was like “wow!” It shocked me because she was so quiet and timid a little bit.

A caring teacher [for African American high school students] contacts me and not the reverse. I had checked her [my daughter’s] grades not too long ago, and I see where a few quizzes she had failed, and I’m thinking, ‘She’s doing great in class, but these quizzes she’s failing.’ Me as [if I were a] teacher, I’d been like ‘look maybe she has anxiety when she’s [a]bout to take a quiz.’ I would [have] of reached-out [to the parent/guardian] and communicated important information to them. Actually, I would feel great [if a caring teacher communicated information to me]. Reason being, I know that there is somebody else in the community other than me or family that is worried about my child’s well-being. I mean; I know they probably have a whole life outside of [school]; they probably have kids too. You know what I’m saying?

What I would consider a not caring teacher as being as someone who never communicates with the parent. Communication—negative or positive—is the key! Parents should communicate with the teacher also, but the teacher is with them more as far as school-work goes. They [noncaring teachers for African American high school students] never like having one-on-one [conversations/conferences] with the student, which I know is probably hard [because] there’s so many students. Them [the noncaring teacher] just basically passing [with a letter grade in a course] the student just because. At the preparatory high school that Amelia attended before transferring to Running

Water High School during her freshman year, I think as far as the teachers went they were more concerned about uniforms and personal appearance vice versa [rather than] education. It was like her appearance would take points off of her grade. It was like they were already in the military, and they were basically training [preparing for the military {Air Force} in the future]. I was angry. In a face-to-face interaction [with noncaring educators], the school administration and staff caused me to step 'out-of-character' behavior[lly]. But, he [noncaring teacher/commander] was very disrespectful; I thought for a teacher/commander, and he was yelling. Students [were] walking down the hall, so I got to yelling. I got to thinking; I was like I got to stop. You just took me out of my character. That was when I sent her back to public school [and enrolled her into Running Water High School] because it was more about appearance [than] education at the preparatory school.

Basically, if a teacher care[s], they would make sure [that] not only my daughter but [also] everyone in the classroom understands what they are teaching. If they don't, and they don't know how to explain it to where the child understands, [the caring teacher for African American high school students would] get somebody else that maybe could explain it to [th]em [to the point] where they'd get an understanding. She [my African American high school daughter] should feel like well appreciated for one and understood and respected [in a caring teacher for African American high school students]. I mean; I think respect goes both ways as far as teacher and student.

Everybody, each culture is different! It is! And, there's still racism in the world. It is! And, not saying that all the teachers are [racist towards minorities], but you probably still have some in there [Running Water High School] that really don't care about whether you're Mexican [or] African American. They don't care about your [minority students'] education because they don't want us [African Americans] there anyway. I'm thinking that they might treat the kids [African American high school students] that's not going for academic honor scholarship different[ly] th[a]n they do [the] ones [African American high school students] that are going for it like Amelia. I know it. I mean because I didn't go for my academic [honor scholarship when I was in high school]; I didn't. I mean, but I could tell the difference how anybody in the school treated, yea, that student [who did go for the academic honor scholarship], so it's a big difference. It's like that's the scary part for me watching her [Amelia, her African American daughter] grow-up. It was like okay I know there's gonna be racism, and it's like are they [White, racist and/or noncaring teachers] going to care about my child [an African American female high school student] just as much as they gonna care about their [White, racist, and/or noncaring teacher's] own race but 'so far so good.' Like I said, 'I'm on [pushing] her [toward and about Amelia's academic success], whether they're not [pushing her]. She's gonna be somebody, so. . . .

### **Results: The Teacher Portraits**

Six teachers at Running Water High School who have worked with African American high school students in different capacities participated in this research study

(see Table 4). The teacher participants represented a broad range of roles, subjects, and classroom environments. The instructional subjects taught by these teachers included general education, special education, and core academic courses, which were science, social studies/history, and English. The instructional environments represented traditional and alternative instructional settings, such as on-site (at Running Water High School) academic credit recovery courses and off-site (at another affiliated location). Due to these different settings, each teacher participant had varying experiences as it applied to working with African American high school students, which extended into school sponsored athletic and nonathletic extracurricular activities and programs.

Table 4

*Profiles of Teacher Participants*

Name	Role	Department	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Jules Fieldcrest	Teacher	Science	Female	White
Kyla Smithson	Teacher	Special education	Female	White
Howard Delaware	Teacher	Credit recovery	Male	African American
Steve Limmerick	Teacher	History	Male	African American
Ryan Setter	Coteacher	Special education	Male	Hispanic/White
Spenser Ombre	Teacher	Math	Male	White

Ms. Fieldcrest was a science teacher who taught Chemistry and worked with 85% regular (average/Common Core courses) ability level and 15% high (advance/Advanced Placement) ability level African American students. Ms. Smithson was a special



education teacher who worked with African American high school students in a self-contained classroom (students do not receive any instruction outside of or leave her classroom for any reason during the school day). Nevertheless, Ms. Smithson had the opportunity to work with general education (regular ability level) African American high school students as peer tutors (for the special education students) on designated days throughout the week in her classroom. Mr. Delaware, despite holding a state issued educator's license in both history/social studies and English, oversaw African American high school students who were labeled as "credit deficient" and needed to earn during the school day lost course credits via on-line courses in a classroom setting that functioned as a computer lab. Mr. Delaware was also an assistant boys' basketball coach. Mr. Limmerick was a history teacher who taught U.S. History and worked with all ability level African American students because U.S. History was a nationally mandated course that was required for high school completion. Mr. Limmerick was also the varsity boys' head basketball coach. Mr. Setter was a special education and English teacher who worked with African American high school students in a cotaught English classroom (a classroom with a general education teacher and a special education teacher, which is also identified as a main-streamed classroom for special education students who take courses with general education students). Mr. Setter was also the head coach for the wrestling team and an assistant coach for the varsity football team. Mr. Ombre was a math teacher who worked with African American high school students in an alternative off-site education setting for students who had become noncompliant inside the traditional on-site high school environment. Despite the off-site location of the alternative program, it was

directly affiliated with Running Water High School and regulated by the Running Water School District.

As a collective of educators, these teachers want the African American high school students at Running Water High School to experience academic success. These educators work with the intent of fostering learning opportunities for their African American high school students to reach the benchmarks of success. Consequently, when they discussed and referred to caring teachers of African American high school students, they more often shared examples and vignettes about themselves rather than other caring teachers of African American high school students at Running Water High School.

With the objective of crafting an authentic narrative to capture and represent each teacher participant contribution, a systematic review was conducted of the 15 teacher interview questions in the *Teacher Interview Protocol* (see Appendix C) together with the transcripts of responses to these questions. The review was conducted to establish the order in which to incorporate the teacher's responses and shape them into a portrait narrative that shared directly quoted responses that presented their perspective(s) about caring teachers for African American high school students. Each portrait narrative was crafted to begin with responses combining interview question one and two, which focused upon the teacher's positive experiences and interactions with African American high school students and shifted to the teacher's comments regarding negative experiences and interactions with African American high school students (question three). The discussion resumed focus on a positive experience but with a specific African American high school student (interview question four). The portrait narrative discussed

the teacher's perspectives on caring teachers in a compilation (interview question five through nine); these were the foci: characteristics (question five), description and characteristics (question six), inside the classroom characteristics (question seven), characteristics pertaining to the actions and performance of African American high school students for caring teachers (question eight), and observed or witnessed characteristics of a caring teacher inside or outside of the classroom (question nine). The portrait narrative shifted to perspectives on noncaring teachers (interview question 10 through 14); these were the foci: characteristics (question 11), description and characteristics (question 10), inside the classroom characteristics (question 12), characteristics pertaining to the actions and performance of African American high school students for noncaring teachers (question 13), and observed or witnessed characteristics of a noncaring teacher inside or outside of the classroom (question 14). The portrait narrative concluded with the teacher's final thoughts (interview question 15).

### **Ms. Fieldcrest's Portrait: It's All about Gaining Trust**

I've honestly seen all ends of the spectrum. I've had African American students that come from great families, have great parents. Their parents interact with the school all the time. I would say that they are probably a little easier to gain the trust of and interact with. I've had [African American high school] students that again on the other end of the spectrum don't really have a great home life. [T]hey are definitely much more difficult to gain the trust of [and] much more difficult to get them to participate in the learning process. [T]hen I have the middle ground [of African American high school students]. They have

decent parents. They may not be involved in the school all the time, and their attitudes range—depends on the student [and] depends on their personality. I have had good experiences. The most positive experiences with my honors and AP [African American high school] students is that it is just so wonderful to see them getting involved in science, wanting to go to college and get involved in that type of degree, and make a good life for themselves. I've also had positive experiences being able to make connections and earn the trust and respect of the [African American high school] students at the lower end of my spectrum [and] have them make great gains throughout the year [and] go from an “F” student to an “A” or “B” student and get them caring about school again.

I've had bad experiences. I've really been trying to talk to them [African American high school students] about gun control and watching what you say to people, and it [the inappropriate use of their language] starts with me sometimes. I've really been trying to pay attention to how they talk to me even if it is a culture thing. Sometimes just the language negatively affects me. I never let them use the 'N-word' [derogative term for African Americans/Blacks] even if it's something that they use all the time because I tell them that it is a respect thing. We don't use that word in this school, or at least we shouldn't. Not all teachers follow that, but, so, sometimes that negatively affects me as teacher trying to teach them right versus wrong. Another thing that I can think of consistent throughout my career not to be offensive [in speaking about/to African Americans/Blacks or you, an African American] but the 'thug life.' [It] drives me

absolutely nuts because that is not just a life-style [but] an attitude, and some of them need an attitude adjustment to avoid those situations of being in some type of gun fight or something like that. Respect yourself; respect others. My number one rule is respect. I always respect my students.

I am a caring high school teacher. I care about them outside of the classroom. I try to attend events of any kind—sporting, band, choir, [and] anything else I can [attend to support the African American high school student]. I always talk to my students in the hallways, just talking to them about how things are going at home, especially if I notice a change or notice a trend. I think kind of celebrating with them when they have positive things going on in their lives just celebrating with them or telling them, ‘Hey, that’s great, I’m proud of you.’ On my good days, I’ll notice a haircut or new outfit. One specific teacher that’s just always going above-and-beyond, it almost seems like this person puts their students before themselves and their family. It seems like that [they] are just involved in like every aspect of the school so that to me seems like a very, very caring person. [T]hey seem to put their students first. What a caring teacher does in the classroom is hang [their] achievements, pictures of [their] kids, and pictures that [their] kids have made. They [African American high school students] kind of get to know me a little better, and I think it makes them feel a little more comfortable. I do circulate the room, and I do talk to them one-on-one. The fact that I take time to plan lessons. It makes me feel good when I hear them [African

American high school students] say, 'I know Ms. Fieldcrest cares 'cause we did this today,' or 'She constantly walks around and helps us.'

They [African American high school students] act different [in a teacher's classroom who cares for them] from how they act outside of school and at home. [L]ike I said earlier, they start out one way at the beginning of the year and then they catch-on, so I'm guessing the environment that they are in is everything. Once they do catch-on to those better habits, they feel better and more positive. They know that they can do something with their life. Whereas, they might not always feel that way outside of school or in whatever home situation that they have. I have a very good class participation rate, especially among African American students. I would say the grades that I get them [to earn] by the end of the year are [a] higher average for them versus other classes.

African American [high school] students behave and perform in a noncaring high school teacher's classroom: (a) poorly, (b) disrespectfully, (c) get kicked-out of class, (d) get into fights, (e) scream at teachers, and (f) have bad attitudes. That's probably the reason why they get kicked-out [of classes and school] because they feel disrespected, and they get disrespectful back. [A] noncaring teacher [for African American high school students] has these [characteristics]: (a) little effort into planning; (b) little effort into grading, (c) little effort into observation of the students in general, (d) quiet, (e) not talkative, (f) doesn't talk to their students, (g) disrespectful, (h) late, (i) leaves early or when

the bell rings, (j) doesn't seem to present themselves in a professional way, and (k) doesn't seem to do professional relationships well. I could probably go on.

I would not be here [at Running Water High School] if I did not love my interaction with all of my students, especially the African American students. It's challenging for me, but at the same time, it's very, very rewarding, especially when I can turn someone around and help give them a more positive outlook on what their future can look like. My job is not just to teach my content. It is to be a part of their [African American and other ethnic group students] lives every single day and help them understand right vers[us] wrong, and how they should act, and what they shouldn't do, and how to become the best that they can be. So, sometimes [that] has nothing to do with chemistry. A lot of the times it doesn't, and we find ourselves kind of going-off on tangents, but I feel those teachable moments are so important.

### **Ms. Smithson's Portrait: Lessening the Gaps for Students of Color**

Well, I have a bit of unique situation in that I teach a self-contained special education classroom, so I have a total of nine students in my room. The majority of my students rely on me for all aspects of their care; most of them are nonverbal. The unique part is that I have general education students in my classroom [be]cause we offer a peer tutor program; it's a credit class. They [peer tutors] come in everyday for a period, and they get to work with my students. So, I come in contact with a lot of African Americans [high school students] both special needs and gen ed [general education]. It's unique [my classroom] in that

way because I get kind of both [students/worlds]. I have kind of had to break down barriers with African American families because I don't know a lot about the culture that I need to know. I have wonderful families that have really allowed me in to learn more about them and their students and how they operate as a family, which has been huge. At the same time, my general education students, who are peer tutors, any questions that I have they give me answers that they have. I guess, I feel like maybe I was a bit naïve about it [culture] when I started teaching. I just kind of assumed that you know everybody's got their way of doing things, and I kind of took it at surface.

It [culture] is excessively important, whether it is the African American culture or any other culture. If you don't know what you're talking about, you need to educate yourself because otherwise I am [you are] not doing the service to them that I [you] need too. I get a lot of, 'Oh, the White girl does not understand. The White girl does not know my life. You know, the White girl doesn't understand my struggle,' and that's accurate. I don't, but I also don't understand a lot of other Caucasians' struggles either. It has nothing to do with color, but I, you know, hear that a lot, whether it is in the hallways or in my classroom. It's a lot of 'well that White person does not get it, or you know maybe they're Hispanic, so they don't understand what the African American culture deals with.' I feel like even though African [American] some [but] not all, African American students, parents, and families feel like the Caucasian community doesn't understand the African American community; a lot of times, I feel like it's



because they [Caucasian high school teachers] have not had the opportunity, and, it goes both ways. You know, it's a two-way street, so, I think that's probably the only negative I've encountered, not being given the chance to understand and to make that relationship and that connection [with African American high school students].

I have a peer tutor who moved here from a different school. When he came in, he had his hat turned on sideways, his backpack slung over his shoulder, and his pants half-way down his rear end, and I could see his underwear. He just sauntered in like he owned my room. My first reaction was there was no way that I should have said yes to letting him be a peer tutor, and I was excessively judgmental. I looked at him and said, 'Here is the deal. You're here; we have to get along for the rest of the semester, so get your hat off, put your backpack in your locker, pull your pants up, and get rid of the attitude.' He was excessively apologetic [and] a gentleman. He was probably one of my best peer tutors. One of my most educated students I've ever come across. Brilliant mind. Wonderful family support and didn't adhere to that stereotypical look that he showed me the first day. So, in my mind, it became negative automatically because I went by first impression.

To go beyond first impressions and become [a] caring [teacher for African American high school students], a teacher must have open-mindedness, flexibility, the ability to empathize, the ability to care, and the ability to go beyond the classroom setting to reach a student no matter what that takes. I think

one of the biggest things that we see here in our school system [Running Water School District] is classroom instruction is excessively important, and please don't misunderstand because it is, but for some of our students this is their safe zone because what they come from is not safe. So, me instructing them in algebra or in history doesn't mean a lick to them because they need to feel safe, and they need to feel like one of their environments is positive, and one of their environments at least makes them feel like they are important, and for most them, this is that environment. So, while instructing them in those things is definitely important so is looking at them and going, 'Hey, how is your day; how is your weekend? You know what, I really love your shoes, or your outfit is really nice. You got a haircut, and it looks great. Hey, I'm really proud of you for this, or high-five on this.' To me, that's just, as if not more so, important than teaching them the book stuff that they need to know, and I feel like everything else fits into that.

They [African American high school students] need to know that they are cared about, so I feel like when you talk about teachers that really care about students; they take the time and they take the initiative to make the effort to show how they feel about their students. [T]his is going to sound silly but just noticing students, just talking to them, making eye contact with them, making them feel like you care, and making them feel like that for that one moment you're the only person that they're talking to, and they are the only person that you care about, whether or not you care about what they are talking about. I feel like if a teacher

is engaged with their students and their instruction that equates to me [being] a caring teacher. If my students know I care about them, and I expect X, Y, Z from them; they're going to hit X, Y, Z and sometimes go higher because they know that I care, and they know that I know they can do it. [T]hat goes for all students, whether its special needs whether its peer tutors. [T]hey rise to the occasion.

Noncaring high school teachers are focused on 'I'; it's very much self-centered. You know 'I' am here to teach my subject matter. My grades [are] done; my paperwork's done. They [noncaring teachers] do the bare minimum. They're there to teach but teach a subject. There is no dedication; that's evident. I would picture a classroom that is literally full of rows of desks; [it's] [v]ery sterile, very cold, [and] very uncaring. There's nothing on the walls. There's like the old eraser old chalk board or dry erase board with writing on it [be]cause that's all the teacher does. I hear, 'Here is your assignment. When you are done, turn it in,' and, that's it; there is no direct instruction taking place. There is no connection, excitement, [or] engagement. African American students are off-task—[s]leeping, playing on a phone, staring at the wall, daydreaming, anything they can [do] to survive the 45 minute class period that they are stuck in—in a noncaring teacher's classroom.

I think one of the big things that needs to happen, whether it is our school corporation or others, is that there needs to be a stronger home-school connection. I feel like there is a barrier. I feel like there's a wall between parents and families and school itself, and I don't necessarily, I'm sure that [it]'s higher in African

American students, but not saying that doesn't happen in Caucasian families and Hispanic families. I know that it does, but I feel like breaking down those walls and breaking down those barriers from the top down makes a huge difference. You know, so starting with your administrator and your social workers and your school counselors, there needs to be more conversation. There needs to be more connection, more 'Hey, your kiddo's having some problems with this behavior, can you come in, or let's talk about it or have a conference over the phone real quick and figure out how we can solve this?' 'What's going on at home? How do you handle this? How do you want us to handle this?' The more that you get parents, and families, and schools all involved with the schools, the more productive it's going to be. Not always, there are always going to be situations where it may make it worse or may not help in the least bit, but there needs to be more effort to make that connection, and I feel like that's going to break down so many barriers and increase so many wonderful things—graduation rates, you know, productive members of society, and those kinds of things. And, then the more that you do that, the more that families and students know that you care, and the more willing they are going to be, I think, to really participate. I think opening the doors to helping them explore opportunities. I feel like so many of our students come here, and they don't know what is available to them. I feel like there's w[h]ere [we are] missing the boat a little on how you get from first day of freshman year to what happens after you graduate.

**Mr. Delaware's Portrait: I Know Their Experience**

[I] had the pleasure of being an African American male in the high school setting [and thought it was] good for young African American males and young ladies to see someone that looks like them in this setting as a teacher. I have a great rapport with the kids. Well, I have a young personality as well, so my interaction is pretty good. I haven't had any complaints or any mishaps. I do know that some may have their own story. It's like everybody has their own story, but I believe that once the line of the communication is open I believe you can reach any kid. If anything, it's more positive than negative because this [opportunity] for somebody like myself, somebody that's been from Running Water [and] grew-up in Running Water, I know where a lot of the African American students come from. I know their parents, or I know their family member[s]. If they're acting out of character, they see me, and they know they have to get back in[to] character or how they were raised. [T]hey know better, so I really only have a positive [experience because of our connection/shared stories].

I think when any type of student realize[s that] it doesn't matter who they are they're getting treated the same way. They respect that, and once you get the respect, you have them, and they'll be engaged. Being firm with it. Standing your ground. Don't show any leniency towards a certain group or a certain people and being consistent. I think being consistent is the key to success, so, once you stay consistent with being fair and firm. You can relate to the music

that they listen to. Relate to the language that they speak. Relating to the situations that they're in, especially the young men here, young athletes here. Certain situations, temptations that they get put into, I can relate to that because I've been there [and] done that, and I might not have handled it the right way, but now that I know that, I can explain why I feel like their way is not the right way. Learn from me, so you don't make the same mistakes. I think that relatedness is the big thing.

I would say someone that cares, use myself for example. I have a couple kids here that they have to take these credits; they have to graduate. Graduation is a very important thing to their family. They're trying to take care of their house, so they're working. Kids will come in here and be tired from working and getting off at 11 or 12 at night [PM] and then going home probably being the man of the house, so, what [I would] do I would give them time to rest. I have some kids that don't really eat that [the cafeteria] food. They don't really eat at home, so, my wife and I, we make extra food for lunch. [I do] little stuff like that [to show I care about them and their well-being]. Then, once you do stuff like that . . . they know that I'll look out for them. In the caring classroom, they will engage. They [African American high school students] will understand because the teacher is going to make them understand why they're doing this. I think that's the problem with the culture let alone school period and that's White, Black, Mexican, or any type of color. If they know why they're doing this, [then] it changes the whole reason on learning this. I'm not interested in learning geometry if geometry's not

going to pay my mom's rent that she's struggling at home to pay. So, you gotta give me a reason why I'm not supposed to catch up on my sleep versus to you teaching me why this X and Y equal this. I think that's any kid. My history teacher in high school, I want to say his name was Mr. Greenwich, yeah Mr. Greenwich, and [he] broke stuff down to us as if they were movies. He broke down stuff to make us [want] to learn.

Someone [A teacher] that doesn't care has something drew up in their mind about a student. They put [African American high school] kids in a category already before they walk in the door. I think society gets so caught up in numbers and statistics that they start relying on them. Once they start relying on them [numbers and statistics], then they put us [African Americans] in the certain category. A lot of the stuff [thinking/behavior] is bias [numbers, statistics, and behavior]. I've had a couple of students come in here and say, 'I can't be in there because they're racist.' I don't know; I can't really speak on if people are racist or not. Someone [A high school teacher] that doesn't care [won't] want to communicate or interact with them [African American high school students, or] with the parents. [Noncaring high school teachers have] ignorance to[wards] different social groups; that could be from eth[n]ic, to economy, [or] to any type of [difference, and] someone that's nice to others then maybe the minority student. I mean I've seen a lot of that [treating minority students differently]. [A]cademically, they're [African American high school students are] gonna fail. They're not gonna have any type of understanding [or] be prepared. Behavior can

vary. They can act-up just to get kicked-out [of class or school]. Kids not paying attention to the class. They're sitting in the back, and the teacher [is] just letting them sit there and allowing kids to fail. Someone that doesn't check up on them and . . . find out the reason why he's not paying attention [or] he or she is sleeping in class. [There is] shouting, yelling, [and] going back-and-forth with the student. [African American high school students,] they'll act-up right when that bell [rings], so they can get kicked-out [of class or school]. A lot of them [African American high school students,] either avoid not going [to school] or skip [that class or school]. We [educators] don't give them [African American high school students] the credit they deserve on how intelligent they are and how much access that they have at the palm of their hands. They can learn if they want to, but they have to be triggered.

Relating with their life circumstance. Relating with their culture. Relating with their [the] different situation[s] that an African American male or female may be put into, especially with the [present] political [climate] that's going on these days. Relating to their feelings, I think that's a big thing. Caring teachers, of course, because a noncaring teacher could care less about their [African American students'] feelings. A situation could happen, a kid could be shot, or a person could be shot. What's going on nowadays is a White police officer kills a Black teenager or Black person. Kids feel that; they understand what's going on. They [feel] like they're targeted. If they feel like they're going to be targeted, [when] they come to school and see someone that looks like them



[and someone who] looks like the officers or someone that's shooting or someone that's saying racist statements and getting away with it, they already have [their] guard up. A caring teacher is going to already have that [understanding] down because that relationship already [is] going to be established [between the African American high school students and the caring high school teacher].

**Mr. Limmerick's Portrait: Try to Make It/Be Relatable**

The first thing that I think that they [African American high school students are looking for [is] acceptance not only from the instructor but kind of from classmates as well. I've also found that they're looking for relatability. I think because there are a large amount of teachers that they don't feel like they connect [with African American high school students]. They [African American high school students] also aim their bar low. They're okay with average because I think that's what's modeled. That's what's expected, and sometimes that's what's praised, average, so they aim for that. I think a lot of my students are, this is what I tell them, they are afraid of success. They [African American high school students] don't like to be challenged in front of their peers. They don't they don't like to be perceived or projected as not smart. Writing sometimes can be a negative for them. Discipline, I think African American kids they're not accepting of when they're wrong, and I think more so than my White students because I look at the detention [and] attendance [reports], sometimes. Honestly, I think that they [African American high school students] are very good

collaborative working people, students; they're willing to help each other.

African American high school students are hands-on, creative, and very verbal.

Maybe, me being kind of an outspoken African-American/Black man and a coach. I'm kind of out front like forcing you [them] to do some sociable things, and their experience with the Black man [might] not have been the best from dad to wh[om]ever. Also, me, being a black male and a disciplinarian, a lot of the [African American high school students] cling [to me] because unfortunately, there are some absentee dads that aren't there [to be] that male figure, so they kind of cling that way. [I] break that wall down [and] help them overcome something. I think that they haven't seen a lot of successful African American [role] models to say, 'Oh, let me go chase that.' Kind of case in point, a young girl that just doesn't talk much. What I did, I put her in public speaking. [She was] [a]fraid to death. Backtrack, [I] told her, 'Okay, you can come after school and do it [present] in front of me.' [I p]raise her to death. 'You did a good job, even though there wasn't a crowd.' [I t]old another couple of teachers. [I] asked the student, 'Can you do that again? That was great.' I bring like four other teachers in to watch, so she does it again. Same [praise], 'Oh my gosh, it's great!' The next time we had a public speaking [opportunity in class], I told her, 'Hey, imagine those six people in the classroom.' It was like boom. The whole class was like, 'Wait a minute, who are you?' [During her speech,] she gave me a look [, and] it melted me.

[A caring teacher for African American high school students] should be [or do] the following: pay attention, be attentive to who your students are cause they're different; relative to their world; speak the[ir] language a little bit; have a sense of humor; be clear and precise [about] what you want out of them going into [the semester/year]; stick to the discipline [procedures that] you establish; a cheerleader; sometimes go overboard; high-five or fist-pump; and stay in constant communication with them one-on-one. Whatever subject that you're teaching, find something relative in today's history so that they can feel connected [be]cause our [African American high school] kids are so far away from the Civil War and everything else. You know, just setting the culture, create a culture in your classroom. I try not to be like anyone else's class. I try to be the best like no other. Make your class just like no other class. Mrs. Turnville, she is in our Student Support Center, and I think her room is so feng shui. She's always speaking positive, and everything is positive in her little aura. You know, she's one of those "I can save every kid," and she tries it. Even the kids that are little nasty, they are the best kids in the world. [In a caring teacher's classroom] African American [high school] students open up [and] talk a lot. They talk more than my White students because they feel comfortable. It's like I'm at home, and I can relax, let loose, [and] have [a] conversation. [T]hey [African American high school students] make a lot of eye contact, and they listen more. They are all kind of directly focused on their work. The level of speaking is lower than normal. [T]here's a lot more polite words being used, a lot of hands being raised, [and] the

proper protocol is being used in the classroom. It's almost a little self-governing in that classroom [because] there's less, less discipline [concerns].

[In the classrooms of] teachers who they [African American high school students] feel like they [teachers] don't care, behavior becomes an issue. They never focus in on the students. There's no interaction, no questions [are] asked, and no assignments [are] being done, so test scores end up being bad. [A noncaring teacher for African American high school students is] one that never asks a kid, 'How's your day?' One that never smiles when they walk in[to the classroom] or make eye contact with students. They never focus in on the students[, and it] always seems that their problems are bigger than the students. You see the teacher sitting at her or his desk all the time. I think honestly teachers that do a lot of section review out of the back of the book, do not give them [students] open-ended questions to the point where you can see why they feel the way they feel or debate to understand it fully, and try to get through [the lesson quickly,] so they [the noncaring teacher] can get on the computer, I think those teachers don't care. Their [noncaring teachers for African American high school students] rooms have no vibrancy, no color, [and] nothing for them to actually look at and read [that is] positive. Desks [are] the same way all the time and [African American high school students'] heads are down on the desks. From the students, you hear a lot of moaning and groaning. African American high school students don't perform very high because they don't have support, [and] they don't have support because they are afraid to ask for help. I think those teachers

make it a bad [educational] experience [for African American high school students].

You have to expose new teachers to African American students. They're different, go through different dynamics than their other students, and they have different ways of thinking and of reacting to certain situations. I think that teachers need to be [trained and] exposed to [African American high school students] during their student teaching because a high percentage of African American students are [in] every school system. You have to be able to understand what they [African American high school students might] have gone through before they come to your classroom; being relative to their world; and how to deal with it. They [teachers of African American high school students] have to be taught how to educate them. I think there needs to be some type of class or some type of educating factor of how to make those [African American high school] kids comfortable, or you know to trust you, so they can get a 100% [from the] learning environment. Listen and be a problem solver. Give them solutions to their [African American high school students'] issues-academically, socially, personally. You know, give them the solution to get out of whatever they're in[volved], good and bad. Force them to do things that are out of their comfort zone. Let them know that it's okay to be top of their class. Let them know its okay to get [receive/earn] an A; you'll still be cool.

**Mr. Setter's Portrait: Perception Often Leads to Misperception**

In 2009 when I started teaching, I was hired as a long term sub and the head wrestling coach at a high school where it was about 90% African-American, nine percent Hispanic, and one percent Caucasian [White] so that [student racial composition] was kind of the driving factor there for me. I'm a little intimidating. I believed I had the advantage, 6'1" and 285 pounds, so, I thought I could walk in there [and] be like [a] magic wand, 'Hey, you do this. You do this. Let's do it, get it happening.' I would say about two weeks in I noticed just the lowest grades ever, so I'm like this is harder than I ever expected. Then, I started to kind of have those conferences with the kids and pull [th]em aside. The relationships were building. It was just so much pushback [academically]; [academics were] not important to them. I was like I gotta get [th]em to do work, so I went to each person and started to ask basic questions. 'Hey, what do you do after school? What do you do during school?' 'Why'd you pick that backpack out? [African American high school students' thinking] went from 'I don't care about your work' to 'Oh, you care about me, so I'm gonna start caring for [about] you.' They thought that doing my work would fill my bucket; you know, that's kind of how I approached it. What I didn't realize [wa]s what they needed [was] their bucket [to be] filled as well. Me being open, speaking with them, and caring about what they [had to] say was very beneficial in getting them motivated. I tell my students and wrestlers, 'I'm gonna pull you from that negativity, and I'm gonna put some positive in your life. I'm gonna speak life to you what I know,

and take what I give you. I can take-out what you don't like, but you're gonna learn positive things from me.'

A caring teacher is gonna be there 100% of the time. I give them my cell phone number and my email number. It's like communication. I don't care what's happening, what's going on, you can't tell me anything that I haven't heard already because I've done this [caring for African American high school students] enough, and, their [the] stuff that you're going through, I went through. We don't ever come out and say, 'Okay, well because you're African American this is what you need to know.' No, it doesn't matter. They have that idea toward me not [me] toward them. Another thing that's caring, you're always there for them [African American high school students], even if it's a little gesture as knowing their birthday or introducing yourself to their parents/grandparents or whoever shows up to watch them [wrestle/play football]. You cannot fake it. You cannot go in there and be like and pretend to like the music. You can't pretend to want to talk like they [talk], but I've seen that. The kids are like, 'That's trying too hard you know,' and that comes out. Another part of that caring teacher [characteristic] would be not to group that person. I hate to say this, but a lot of times when you first start that relationship with that [African American high school] kid/student very early, whether it's [in] classroom or on the field, it's very important to extend/give leniency. While you're working on that emotional part of the student and showing that you care, part of that is allowing them that extra time [and] knowing that they can make that up. They're

not in a hole so deep that they can't get back out of it. They [African American high school students] want to be challenged. They want to be in safe environment to be challenged. They can't feel like, 'Oh, all I can do is fail!' [A caring teacher for African American high school students does] not set the standards super high; they already got a lot of that negative anxiety and stuff to deal with on a daily basis. Allow them that time where we're going to 'trial and error' this. Give them opportunities to change every day; give them opportunities to better themselves every day. You know, I had to learn [not to do] this. I'd try to raise my voice a lot of times; I'd use my stature as kind of motivation. A lot of times, that doesn't work! You're going to struggle, so you've gotta know when to taper it. The classroom needs to look inviting and comforting to them. You need to have the flow of the classroom. It can't be chaotic, and it can't be cluttered. It [The subject matter] has to be relevant to them, and the only way it will be relevant to them is showing them you care and putting in that extra time and work shows them that you care.

When they see that [noncaring teacher] person not putting in any effort, that person is also not fighting for them. [For African American high school students a noncaring] classroom reminds them of their house and of people that they deal with every day. Aside from the aesthetic view of a classroom, you would notice that there would be no differentiation. The [noncaring teacher] would be straight to the point. It's like, 'If you don't do it, you fail. If you can't do it, I'm sorry.' A [noncaring] teacher for African American high school



students groups them and has preconceived notions about them, [do] not care about who that person is, [and do] not [care about] building that [caring student/teacher-teacher/student] relationship. A lot of those [noncaring] teachers [of African American high school students] also take regular mannerisms, things that these children/students do on a regular basis as disrespect. It's almost like offensive [to the noncaring teacher of African American high school students]. They will say, 'Oh, you're disrespecting [me/my classroom/my rules], or you're being disrespectful. Sorry, you disrespected me. Get out of my classroom!' In the classroom, they're [African American high school students] able to sit in the back of the classroom with their headphones on. They sometimes talk under their breath. They get emotional. Their body language is kind of aggressive sometimes. The [noncaring] teacher [for African American high school students] will say, 'Well, they're not performing in this class. They're not doing this in this class. Let's move them.' They become transient a lot of times, and the counselor, deans, or principals will get involved [in the situation]. They [African American high school students] hear all that negative stuff from that person [adult/disciplinarian]; therefore, it's a losing battle for that kid.

[African American high school students might] not get the call home because we [educators] assume already that if they act like that nobody cares about them, so why am I going to call home. Everybody even that caring person a lot of times is guilty of that [assumption]. I have learned in the past to just call anyway find out for yourself. It may be horrible, but sometimes you will find out

that it's a great experience! It's not only good for the student; it's good for the parent. You're reaching out and showing that parent that you care just as much about them as you do [that African American high school student]. That bridges the gap and breaks down those barriers.

We got cultural diversity training, and these are things we need to do, but nobody's ever said this is how you should be [in your interactions with African American high school students]; I know what didn't work and what does work. But, it's also interesting to think that what if we started approaching these [African American high school] students not from their level but from my [the teacher's] level. What kind of level of experience [with African American high school students] do these teachers have coming in[to the school environment]? Sometimes, they'll put the African American students with the African American teacher; a lot of times that does work. Are they [African American teachers] the best fit for them [African American high school students]? Is that [approach] even setting them [African American high school students] back even more? Does that set them [African American high school students] up for failure later on in life? Approaching it [caring relationships with African American high school students] from the teacher standpoint rather than the student standpoint will also allow people to open their minds a little bit more. If you [experts] say, 'You're going to go teach like this because these people need it like this.' You [experts] almost have a negative shutdown from the beginning, but if you can say, 'Hey, I can make your classroom better. I can make you a more caring teacher, regardless

of who you're doing [working with or] interacting with." Then that's gonna bridge a gap to shut down our wall. We're sometimes the only positive influence they [African American high school students] have, so approaching it from the teacher aspect, I really think it's great.

**Mr. Ombre's Portrait: Success is the Same for All Students**

I would say that my experience working with African American students has been very frequent in the Running Water School District at The Excellence School, which is working with youth, kids in alternative setting, teaching algebra. Probably, a good one-half of the students were of African American background. It's been positive in a number of ways. I am younger than the most the teachers in the teaching force, so I would say that I share other interests than them. I listen to rap music. I like football, you know. I like [athletic] jerseys [and] different kinds of trends that they [African American high school students] like. It actually gets me through to the kids sometimes. Whenever I quote verse in a song that they like or something, so it's positive and fun. I've had success in reaching them and helping them in alternative setting. One of the [African American high school] girls, Charity that I had got a perfect score on her ECA [End of Course Assessment] exam in an alternative setting. I've worked with her a few times. That was a big success for her and me!

In alternative setting, you know, usually, those kids there have some kind of issues [with] working in a traditional setting. It's hard for me to separate [by racial/ethnic groups] because everything I'm thinking of I mean some of the

White and Hispanic students do [too]. One thing that I have with the students in general like wearing hats or hoods during school time. Personally, I don't care, but it's a school policy that they can't [wear hats or hoods]. I try to enforce the school policy, and I don't get much kickback from it. It's the same thing every day having to tell Johnny to 'take his hood off.' I would say that it [working with African American high school students] hasn't been any more negative than working with any other students in an alternative setting.

This [African American high school] kid's name is Howard, and he and I have had a rough time sometimes. But the truth is, I try not to hold onto things to take them personally because that's not my job. If is a different setting, out in the world maybe, you could hold a grudge, but I personally [am] not a fan of holding grudges in general. Even if a kid misbehaves frequently you know, I see them outside in the hallway or something I always say, 'Hi' to them and speak to them. Some of them [African American high school students], I think it annoys them. 'You're not supposed to like me.' I just keep at [th]em, and Howard is one student that I think there has been enough of that [interaction] he and I have a special relationship now. Where before, if I would ask him [Howard] something, he wouldn't listen to me, and now it's like we have a bond like we understand each other. I enjoy having him now. It's one of those things where maybe it was difficult to start and now it's uh we have a bond. William is another student that I formed a special [caring] relationship with.

A caring high school teacher [for African American students] should be quick to forgive. It doesn't even matter what the violation was you know cause there's kind of things that can frustrate you whether [it is] a little tiny violation like having your hood on every day or something big like cussing you out, threatening you, stealing something, cheating on a test, or you know, all of those things. It doesn't make it okay; things happen with high school kids, so be short to forget because sometimes teachers are the only positive influences in someone's life, so you have to be [forgiving] to stay positive with the kids. Use positive affirmations. Talk to them [African American high school students] like they can be successful even if your own personal judgment is that they can't be successful. You talking to them in a way makes them think that they [can] be successful [and] might just plant a seed. Maybe even, you don't see it at that time, but later on down the road [the student] will grow into being [becoming] successful. For all students, talk to them; smile at them; show an interest; ask them if you can help them. I would say that a caring teacher['s] classroom is go[ing to] be somewhat calm, relaxed, and a safe environment. Objectives and procedures are probably posted in the [caring teacher's] class and things like that. You know there will probably be student work somewhere I would imagine. You know it's go[ing to] look nice and vibrant, but you know, some of the teachers I remember in high school were some of the more caring ones [and] didn't have classrooms like that. The flip side of that is [the] teacher that don't really care

about the kids but care about the curriculum. They are like you got to sit-up, and have your pencil sharpened, and be on time every day, and no excuses.

[A] no[n]caring would be a teacher that is rigid on policy and has no room for, doesn't care, or consider a student's personal circumstances. They're uncaring, and they're apathetic. They really don't care what happens. They have no sense of efficacy for what happens [with a] student's success or after they get out of their classroom. They [noncaring teacher is] always like, 'Well, this is the way because of that' not because of anything they can do to change the situation or try to help. That's one side, and the other side is like teachers that think that it [the classroom and procedures] should be very rigid. [Students should] [b]e on time; get to your seat; and have your materials prepared. Students will be disinterested. It's either chaotic or lifeless [with their] heads down, if they are allowed to have their head down or just dead silent no interaction with students. The other side is [the classroom is] like crazy [with students] doing noninstructional stuff. There'll be arguments with students. Fear may be present in the classroom of a noncaring teacher [be]cause the students are afraid to do this or that because, 'This guy is going to go berserk on me because I dropped my pencil or didn't have a pencil, you know.' That's where [the] caring teacher would try to understand the circumstances, talk to [th]em about what's going on [and] those kind of things.

Many times minority students, especially African American students, find themselves placed in alternative programs. I can think of Walter. Doing the

remediation classes, he's passed his ECAs because like I said, 'He's a bright young man.' When he came to The Excellence School, he only had like eight credits, and in the first semester, he was able to recover 11 [credits]. He just sits there and knocks this stuff out. He's really smart, but in the general classes, he doesn't fit-in, but here, he'll sit there and zone-in. He's another student too that he and I have an understanding. I think that he knows I'm fair [be]cause when another teacher tries to tell him he still has problems with them. He and I haven't had any issues anymore because I think that he understands. It's good to see a kid that struggles be able to find a different situation where he can be successful. I worry about him once he graduates because I don't think he has any plans for college. He has so much potential to do great if he put his mind on something like college or like a trade, something positive, [but] he isn't interested in that stuff. He is interested in girls and his buddies, those kind of things. It makes me worry for him a little you know. I hope that we can get him and help him graduate because that would be good if does.

### **Results: The Student Portraits**

Five African American high school students enrolled in Grades 10 through 12 at Running Water High School at the time of these interviews participated in this research study (see Table 5). Four of the five students would graduate in June 2018 from the Running Water High School and enter a postsecondary institution in the fall of 2018; each would be entering a four-year college or university on either an academic or athletic scholarship. Nathaniel Bavaldi had recently completed his junior year and was in the

transition (summer) before technically being classified as a senior. Amelia Brudleberry was in the second semester of her sophomore year and was on schedule to graduate in June of 2019. Each student in this research study was highly involved in both academic and extracurricular activities—clubs, organizations, and sports—and maintained academic recognition throughout their high school career.

Table 5

*Profiles of Student Participants*

Name	Year (grade [when interviewed])	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Amelia Brudleberry	Sophomore (10)	Female	African American
Nathaniel Bavaldi	Junior (11)	Male	African American
Levi Mathens	Senior (12)	Male	African American/ Biracial
Hope Springs	Senior (12)	Female	African American
Paris Journey	Senior (12)	Female	African American

Miss Brudleberry was a sophomore who believed that she had entered the phase of “self-identification” and had begun to explore what truly interested her in life. Mr. Bavaldi was a junior (a few weeks away from becoming a senior) who felt certain of his path toward manhood, his purpose in life, and his postsecondary education plans. Mr. Mathens was a senior who felt as if his high school experience had taught him many lessons about himself, his passions in life, and his potential. Miss Springs was a senior



who expressed great optimism about her future and understood the strides that she would have to make and the obstacles that she would have to overcome to achieve her life-long goals. Miss Journey too was a senior who felt confident that she was still in the life learning process and knew that she had not reached “the ‘ah-ha’ moment point” in life but was headed in the right direction. Each of the student participants articulated similar and different experiences as applied to high school and caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School. Nevertheless, each student participant in the research study acknowledged that they had encountered teachers who cared for African American high school students throughout their time at Running Water High School.

For the objective of crafting an authentic narrative to contribute the lived experiences of each student participant, a systematic review was conducted of the 15 student interview questions in the Student Interview Protocol (see Appendix A) and response patterns. The review was conducted to establish the order in which to incorporate each student’s response to the 15 interview questions and shape their responses into a portrait narrative that explored their perspective(s) about caring teachers for African American high school students (themselves). The resulting narratives were crafted and guided by the following order of interview questions. Each portrait narrative began with the exploration the student’s experiences in general with teachers in high school (interview question one). From a positive perspective, the narrative addressed the student’s experiences in school (interview question two) and provided a description of a teacher who had made their experience in high school positive (interview question four).

The direction shifted towards the negative perspective as each portrait narrative addressed the student's negative experiences in high (interview question three). Next, the narrative discussed the student's perspectives on caring teachers in a compilation of interview questions five through nine; these interview questions addressed these aspects of a caring teacher: characteristics (interview question five), description and characteristics of a specific caring teacher (interview question six), how the teacher made them feel (interview question seven), how they acted with and performed for a caring teacher inside the classroom (interview question eight), and when the student experienced a caring teacher inside the classroom/special time (interview question nine). The student's perspectives on noncaring teachers was a combination of interview question 10 through 14; these interview questions addressed these aspects of a noncaring teacher: characteristics (interview question 11), description and characteristics of a specific caring teacher (interview question 10), how the teacher made them feel (interview question 12), how they acted with and performed for a caring teacher inside the classroom (interview question 13), and when the student experienced a caring teacher inside the classroom/special time (interview question 14). Each student portrait concluded with the study providing any insight that they felt appropriate to add to the conversation (interview question 15).

**Miss Brudleberry's Portrait: Gives You Opportunities to Step Outside of Yourself/Push Your Limits**

I've had some good experiences with teachers. I really, you know, haven't had any conflicts with any of my teachers, so I would say, 'It's been

pretty good.’ Then you got those kind of teachers who are pretty nonchalant to all their students; they’re not focused on one group of people. You know, they’re pretty much open to everybody. You got some of those teachers, you know that will kind of uplift you, and you got some of those teachers like I said that are nonchalant and just go-with-the-flow. I haven’t like really had any bad experiences in high school like teacher wise. It’s been pretty good so far. I haven’t come across any negative influences with teachers. There’s a lot that goes on in the school like violence and stuff like that, so it’s a lot of negative energy around me every day, and I just really don’t feed into it to be honest. It’s been pretty good so far.

[I] like the teachers [that are] uplifting and just understanding. Not like saying I have an excuse for not doing an assignment, but I just like those teachers who are understanding. Ms. Fieldcrest, she’s an honors teacher; she expects a lot, but she knows the boundaries between college students and high school students. You can see the differences between some honors teachers. Let’s say my math teacher, he pretty much expects us to know everything that he teaches to us. He’s really fast paced; like honor students, I know they learn fast, but his fast pace is really fast. He’ll give us [a] couple of examples, and then, there is a homework assignment. The next thing you know [on] Friday, we got a quiz on it. Then, Ms. Maddox, she spends time on our topics and what we’re doing to make us have a better understanding of what we’re doing.

They [caring teachers for African American high school students] make sure you stay on-track. Well, they give you the grade I guess that you deserve. They don't just hand-out Fs and As and stuff. They care about your progress in the class. Like hey, if you're talking too much, they say, 'You gotta quit talking because you just failed this quiz.' I mean they will speak to you if you see [th]em outside of school. Like Ms. Maddox, I saw her in [a well-known hardware store chain] the other day in February. She came-up and spoke to my mom and stuff like that. Any other teacher would be like, 'Hey, what's up?' and just blow-it-off. [A] caring teacher [g]et[s] to know you, welcome[s] you into the class, tell[s] you what the class is about and [what they] expect, and they ask you what you expect from them. I remember like [in] English, Ms. Maddox, she asked us what we wanted from her, and she told us what she wanted from us. [T]hen, we wrote it [each other's wants] out and put it up on the walls and stuff; the year went smoothly. In a caring teacher's classroom, I feel good, comfortable, [and] safe. I feel like I can be myself, like I can interact with people and just be okay. I can do better in the classroom of a caring teacher [be]cause we have a better understanding of each other. I'm very respectful. I'm not saying that I don't respect the other people [noncaring teachers], but you know, I'm more open with them and respect them a little more because they are open with me. Open as in I can come to you [the caring teacher] and talk to you about like a grade. I always look forward to going into a caring teacher's classroom just because I know I can do better in that class; I know I won't have any problems, and just being in there,

it makes me feel so much better about high school pretty much. I mean sometimes you don't look forward to going to school. Mrs. Billings, my third period class, she cares about everybody. She'll [Mrs. Billings will] make sure that you understand all the material that she hands out; she'll go over it. When it's time for the test, you will pass. At least, I like to have one class out of the four I like going to, and it'll be that caring teacher's class.

[In a noncaring teacher's] classroom, I can't act the way I act in a caring teacher's class. [I]n a noncaring teacher's class, you kind of really don't want to say anything out loud. I just stay to myself. I just don't talk, just sit there, try to listen, and take notes as best as I can. [In] a noncaring teacher's class, I can go up and ask them something, and they won't answer my question completely and fully; they just give me half the answer. I'm still confused. Pretty much, they don't look-out for your best interest. I mean they do [look out for your best interest] instruction wise, but they sit down after that, get on their computer, or use their cell phone. They might walk around and try to help you with a couple of problems, but there's not really interaction like the[re] should be between the [African American high school] student and the teacher. I do pretty good because I mean sometimes I have to go online to have some instruction from online. Freshman year [in] an English class, Doggles, [name of the teacher] we w[ere] reading *Romeo and Juliet*, and she just kind of gave us the books and was just like read, and she did not read with us or nothing! It was so unorganized in there, and

it was easy to pass [be]cause we didn't do nothing. It was just crazy. They [noncaring teachers] don't care about if you fail or not.

A lot of African American boys stay in-and-out of trouble. That's when teachers stop caring. They give-up on them, and that's kind of sad to a certain extent to be honest. There's some teachers that care and want to see them [African American boys] do good, like on the [statewide testing]. We had certain lessons that we had to go over to prepare for the [assessment], and Mrs. Underwood, she's a ninth grade English teacher, and she had some boy; I forgot his name. He never shows-up to class. He stays in-and-out of trouble, and she believes that he can really do good on the [statewide testing]. So, I would say she's pretty much caring because she wants to see him do good, and she wants to see him come to class, but its other teachers that just don't care.

**Mr. Bavaldi's Portrait: Help You Become a Better Person/Who You Were Meant to Become**

There's certain teachers that you get along with, and there's certain that you just vibe with. Some that's just neutral, and that means like you [are] just there to 'get,' [and] they're there to just teach you. You don't have a relationship outside that [get-teach] like you don't really crack jokes or have any extra conversation unless it involves school work, basically. I mean I haven't had any major problems with teachers. They don't really baby you into doing stuff in high school, but for the most part, they want you to [do] the work on your own. You have to make sure you do your homework [and] that you go to class. [F]or the

most part, you really have to have a lot more responsibility than in middle school, and they [high school educators] just kind of pass you along. This [responsibility] has been positive. I wouldn't say [it has been] negative, but you like start to see how things work sometimes, and how the world really works.

A couple of people like Jack Jones, [h]e's kind of like a T [truancy] officer in a sense, [and] Mr. Northcomb, this teacher from last year, [t]he[y] helped me with a lot of perspective stuff. Well, like I'll be walking down the hallway, and maybe, I'll like be too loud or clowning around, and then he'll [Mr. Jones will] pull me to the side and be like, 'You know you got to like conduct yourself like more seriously since this is school; get to class on [time]. [Positive teachers] have to be able to like communicate with like a lot of different people and understand people's circumstances and sometimes show tough love. [Positive teachers] sometimes coddle in a sense and [are] willing to basically understand how different people are [from each other]. Not everybody will be treated the same and not everybody should in a sense. Yeah! I think [race matters] because you know you're a victim of your circumstances, so certain people will not experience the same stuff other people may experience based on the color of their skin or something; that's definitely a big part of it.

[Caring teachers for African American high school students] have to be able to like joke around sometimes not be serious sometimes; let [their] hair down and hang out and chill while also teaching the course. I think being just open to new ideas like maybe because they say sometimes teachers learn from students

too, so be open to like trying new things and evolve with time like that. Well, I think the big one [area for a caring teacher for African American high school students] is like in high school we are kids[, and] at the same time we're not babies. [Teachers] don't have to talk loud at us [or] talk like we're dumb. Like, you [teachers] have to basically [remember] we're kids though [and] grown-ups at the same time. [Caring teachers] [f]ind that line where [they] can do both, basically. Let them [African American high school students] know that you [the caring teacher] can always talk to them and let him [African American high school student] know that you're [the caring teacher is] on their side and not against them. You're [The caring teacher is] not trying to fail them [African American high school student]; you're trying to make them the best person that they can be.

[Caring teachers for African American high school students,] I think [are] willing to go the extra mile for a student [who is] like maybe they're having a rough time, and they don't do [a] homework assignment, or they skipped out on a test. [The caring teacher would say,] 'Okay, you can make this one up.' [Caring teacher,] [d]on't make it easy for them [the African American high school student]. [If] I have a teacher who actually cares, and I'm cool with him, I'm more willing to maybe work harder for them because they put so much effort in too. I'm calm[er]. I'll just talk a little bit more. I'm more willing to, if I know that subject, help people out, so it takes a little bit off their [the caring teacher for African American high school students'] shoulders. I'm always going to try my



hardest regardless if I like the teacher or not. [E]ven if I don't like them [the caring teacher for African American high school students,] the grade is still going to show up for colleges, and they're [colleges are] not going to care if you liked that teacher or not. They [the caring teacher for African American high school students are] constantly pushing you and pushing you. At first you may [might] butt heads, but after a while, you get used to them [the caring teacher for African American high school students] and really realize that they're on your team and trying to help you [the African American high school student]. They [caring teachers for African American high school students] didn't dress like up-tight all that; they kind of were more relaxed. The teachers who were like pretty cool and had cool posters, or they might like stuff about formats or how to do formulas. [Poster that were] not funny but kind of amusing versus another [noncaring] teacher [for African American high school students] not having anything [interesting or inviting hanging in their classroom].

The teacher that is not caring [for African American high school students], it seems like they're always talking down on somebody [for] any little thing, whether you didn't bring a pencil or anything like that. They just snap, get a[n] attitude, or walk-in and just get a bad vibe. [The African American high school student notices because] the door kind of slams hard, and they [the noncaring teacher for African American high school students] just roll their eyes [and] walk straight to the desk. In this particular school, there's not really that many Black teachers, so most teachers are White. Then on top of it, their [noncaring

teachers'] perspective of/on certain students based on their color is kind of like [they] give up on them before they [get to know them]. They [Noncaring teacher for African American high school students have] already started try to find ways to kick him out of class and get them out the way, so they just focus on the students they [noncaring teacher for African American high school students] think are worthy of being taught. They [White teachers at Running Water High School] all don't look at students like that [with that perspective] and [t]reat them different[ly and] teach them different[ly]. A good teacher will always adjust the way he needs to teach based on a person's background and how they [the students] are versus a bad teacher who will just teach one way [that only] benefits [the] students that they like so [they can] pass [the course and] leaves the other ones [students behind/in a position to not pass the course]. [This perspective] makes me think of the next class, and I can't wait to get out of here.

[In a noncaring teacher for African American high school students' classroom,] I'm counting [down the minutes and] constantly looking at the clock wondering when I can leave. I really try to stay to my own and not be in that [aura] because I don't want to have to deal with that [because] that'll mess up the rest of my day. [In a noncaring teacher for African American high school students' classroom,] I'm kind of walking on eggshells more cause I know that if you get sent out that's a day you been missing or taught. They'll [a noncaring teacher for African American high school students will] kick you out for you know maybe laughing or something; they say, 'You're not doing your work, so

you might as well get out,' or you do your work, so you [are] just sitting there. If you're not doing anything, they'll be like, 'Why [are] you not doing your work?' [You respond,] 'I'm done.' They'll kick you out [of class]. Honestly, they [noncaring teacher for African American high school students'] don't like you, they'll just keep pushing until they find a reason to put you out. Maybe, you'll get sent to a good dean, and they'll [the good dean will] realize that you shouldn't have been kicked out. I act the same in every class. When you do something in another class, and it's like accepted, it's kind of hard to go to another class, and they contradict [the noncaring teacher] responds differently to the same action. [It makes the African American high school student think,] 'What's really been going on [with these noncaring teachers]?'

Well, Jack [Jones] is African American[, and] Mr. Bloom, the dean who's in here [Mr. Bloom is Nathaniel's stepfather, and we are conducting the interview in Mr. Bloom's office. He is not present.] is African American; they are caring. They [Mr. Bloom and Mr. Jones have] been through it, so they understand how they [themselves] might have been treated in high school. [T]hey [Mr. Bloom and Mr. Jones] know what's already coming, so they try to keep you [African American high school students] ahead of the curve and stuff like that. There are some teachers like Ms. Fieldcrest, a White lady, she's one of those teachers that actually cares. The art teacher, Mrs. House, [another White teacher,] I ain't gonna say she didn't care, but [she] didn't know how to talk to certain people [African American high school students], and she would talk crazy. Naturally, they're

[African American high school students are] gonna react bad. I just think that we should in this school have more African American teachers cause then that show[s] the students that they might [have the same opportunity]. I know this isn't true of course but they might [think] it's always going to be a White person in charge [inside of the classroom/school setting]. There's never any Black people in power. All you see [who are like] you is like a whole lot of Black janitors, maybe a couple of administrators, but you never see a Black teacher like leading the class or anything like that. [This would help] students to relate, and know that they [African American high school students] won't always be behind somebody, always following somebody.

They [African American high school students] naturally go with their own kind, so if they see a Black teacher and are going through something, [they]'re more willing to go talk to [th]em versus a White teacher. You're [An African American high school student is] probably not going to have the same background [and] not really willing to share [personal information] because they [White teacher] won't relate most of the time. I think certain schools should have like trainers to teach teachers [in the area of] ethnicity training [and] teach teachers how to deal with certain students with certain backgrounds. Lastly, [at Running Water High School,] you're supposed to make your own schedule. We [African American high school students] don't really get a lot of help with that. I'm not saying like more White kids get help, but it seems like they know what to pick. That's important because everything you do in high school has a purpose. Every

class fulfills that purpose and helps us [African American high school students fulfill our purpose].

**Mr. Mathens' Portrait: Push Me to Be a Leader and To Strive for the Best**

My experience in high school has been pretty good as it applies to teachers. I open up to the teachers [and] ask them questions, and they, pretty much, they open up back to me. I mean, they [teachers] tell me [when] I need help or don't understand to 'Come see me after school, and we can get some one-on-one time.' I make sure to do that, and it helps me out a lot [and is] much easier for me. My high school experience has been positive in a lot of ways from teachers to activities around the school. I'm an honor roll student, play sports, [and] the treasurer of my high school [student body]. We go out and help people in the community and things like that. I really can't say anything negative about my high school experience.

I'll go all the way back to my freshman year with Mr. Mouse; he was a tennis coach [and math teacher]. Math is not my best subject, but he pushed me to do my best, and he didn't let me sit in the back and not say anything. He called on me in class, made sure I was interacting with everyone else, [and] made [math] a challenge. It helped me out a lot in the long run. Miss Constellation, she was my earth and space science teacher. She's a great teacher, very outspoken, funny, [and] caring. We did a lot of fun things in her class that made everything much easier for me. These teachers were positive [influences] for me; they cared for me. [Caring teachers for African American high school students are/show] love,

respect, trustworthy, kind, caring, and just a lot of that in one [person/teacher]. A homework assignment, a task to help another student, or whatever it might be, they trust you to get [it] done, and you trust them to give you that [responsibility and reciprocal trust]. Trust goes a long way, and if a teacher can get trust out of you, it just makes everything else better. Just trying to build that relationship too with each student, treating every student with the same respect, and giving everyone that opportunity to learn the same way, [these are important aspects of caring teachers]. Mr. Unger is a very caring teacher just simply [by] being there for them [African American high school students], talking to them, and seeing how they are doing; it's an everyday thing for sure. I appreciate him for that. He looks out for everyone across the board and not even [African American high school] kids in 10Y [an after-school college preparatory club sponsored by a retired principal from Running Water School District] for just kids in general.

[In a caring teacher for African American high school students' classroom,] I just I feel more comfortable, feel like I can be myself, and speak out, not [be] like shy, stay quiet, and do my work. I behave very well, [and] I look to be a leader always and to just simply help everyone out, so we all can strive to be the best. [During] 10th grade year, my teacher, Miss Constellation could tell something was bothering me, and she had called me up to the desk. She asked, 'What's going on?' I told her my math grade was bothering me. She pulled the grade up [in the schoolwide grading system]; we talked about it. She reached out to that teacher and talked to him for me. [After that encounter], my

grade end[ed] up making a turnaround. [I had an improved learning experience in that course.] I really appreciate Miss Constellation for doing that for me.

I do well usually in noncaring teacher's classrooms, but my 10th grade year geometry classroom, there wasn't much help in there. A lot of us [African American high school students] were struggling. There were times where she [my geometry teacher] would just lash out immediately, 'You know I've already explained that a few times, so you'll have to figure that out on your own time.' It just really fe[lt] like she didn't seem to care for [African American high school students]. [In a noncaring teacher for African American high school students' classroom,] they give you something to do, and they just sit at their desk [and] have this blank face. They don't really say much to the students. I'm more just quiet in those classes. I don't say much. I mind my own business, stay quiet, and do my work. I just hope the class gets over as soon as possible, so I can move on with my day. In a noncaring [teacher for African American high school students'] classroom, I'm guilty sometimes because if I don't feel comfortable or caring [myself], and I'm less limited to maybe helping those kids that do need help or [that I] see struggling when I'm just being quiet and not really saying much [or being a leader].

I think all students should be able to feel cared and loved, and it starts in the school environment. I still think there is a lot more we can do for our [African American and other] students in the community. Not even high school students, I say the whole Running Water Community, [from the] district down to the

kindergartens [and] all the way up to the 12th graders, there is much more we [caring people—students and educators] can do in the community. It starts with the teachers, with the students, [and] just everyone in the [community] environment. I know it's [Running Water Community and the experiences of African American high school students is] gonna be better in the future, most definitely. Once it [care and love] starts in one area, it moves all around. If teachers are being loving and caring, it rubs off onto the students most definitely. When a teacher's not caring, I think it I think it drops the students' confidence level and academic [performance] level for them to strive to be the best student they can be.

**Miss Springs' Portrait: Does Not See My Race or Color but Sees Me**

My experience has been pretty well, but I would say my freshman and sophomore year of high school, I feel like I was treated maybe not as good. I wasn't treated as equally as other students, probably because of the color of my skin and because I'm smart. People [educators at Running Water High School] treat you differently as an African American. You can get the highest grade in a class, and a White kid could be the second highest, and I feel like he gets more attention because of the color of my skin. I feel like you [an African American high school student] get [treated] not as equally. If you're doing positive things, somebody or someone [at Running Water High School] will treat you like you're not doing your best; they just treat you differently. I'd be in the high [advanced] classes with the other kids, but I felt like I was looked down on. Then, last year,



my junior year of high school, I got elected as my [student body] class secretary, and I fe[lt] like teachers changed [in their treatment of me]. I don't know if it was because I was higher up [and upper classman or a class officer] now or something, but everyone was nicer to me. [Since then,] it's [my high school experience] been positive I would say. I meet a lot of people. I do a lot of things at my school. I'm in the Jefferson's Award Foundation, the AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha] Cotillion, Waterfalls Council, The Press Club, and I'm in other clubs too—art club, tennis; I do too many different things, but I think that's positive.

I have a few [caring] teachers, Ms. Doggles, Mrs. Whittall, [and] Mrs. Lovely; they are very positive people. They have always treated me well. I don't know; they are just great women. I feel like the positive teachers definitely outweigh the negative teachers, any day. They have pushed me. They would see me doing good, and they w[ould] say, 'I'm so proud of you,' or 'If you need help with anything, college stuff, help with anything . . . .' They're just so positive! I think that's what it is. [A caring teacher is] someone that is hard on you like making sure you're doing what you're supposed to do, always happy even if their day might suck, [and] just positive; I just think that's the main characteristic. Ms. Doggles, she will like email you positive things; for my birthday, [she emailed me this message,] 'You're the best person ever! You're my favorite student!' If you're not feeling well, she'll [say,] 'You got this. You'll be fine.' I think she's like the best person ever. Her [Ms. Doggles'] teaching style, I think it's really different. You just don't walk into her class and like start doing work. She makes

it; I don't know how to describe it [be]cause when you walk in, it's not [like] when you're in a class that's boring, 'Do this; Do that.' She spunks it [the classroom environment and instruction] up! I feel great [be]cause I feel like when you're [in a] caring teacher's classroom who doesn't care about race, I think that's a big thing. [S]he's a White teacher and doesn't think about race, put you down, or say stuff that [causes you to say] like 'Huh?' She's just great, so when they're [teachers are] caring, and race isn't involved; it's a good thing. [In a caring teacher's classroom,] I feel more confident. I guess like you don't have to hold back. You know like if you're in a class where there's like tensions, you kind of hold back, and you're not yourself, [b]ut when they're caring, you [are] just happy. I feel like you [an African American high school student] can participate better too, like you're not scared to ask questions. You [an African American high school student can] just walk in[to the classroom], and you're happy. I feel like you [an African American high school student] learn more also. I learn better. It's just smiles every day!

A noncaring teacher, I would say they don't ask you [an African American high school student] questions about yourself. The tension, you can kind of feel that; [there is n]ot that vibe there. It's just a vibe thing. When you meet people, it's like [a] good thing [feeling] or bad [thing]. They treat you [an African American high school student a] little differently. [To say more, I]like a bad feeling, like they don't really like you [an African American high school student] as much even if they don't know you, or they don't deal with you. If you say

something, they kind of disregard what you say, just stuff like that. I would say their [a noncaring teacher's] personality it's just not there [equal] with yours; it's kind of like 'Uh, I don't care.' They [noncaring teachers] just treat you in a mean way, even if it's not direct, you [an African American high school student] can just feel it. Even if you're doing good [well], they don't like that you're doing a good job. [This treatment in a noncaring teacher's classroom causes me to] feel not as confident. I feel like I just want to hurry up and get out of the class. It's like I don't want to say anything to them because I don't want to say something rude back. I feel like you're more scared, [and] you don't want to be your true self because you're scared they [noncaring teachers] might say something to you, you're nervous all the time. It's just like you don't want you to talk to them or even be in their class. I still act the same; I'm very. . . . I'm always happy. You know, I'm just myself. I perform well in like every class because I feel like they might treat you bad, but you still have to focus on yourself and do great either way. [I]t's still sometimes that feeling like, 'Oh, my God. They're acting a little differently [towards me].' I think that [unequal treatment] still can affect you even if you're doing well. I feel like you're not getting to your full potential because of them [the noncaring teachers] even if you're doing great academically. [One memorable experience that I had with a noncaring teacher], I would say [was during] freshman year. It was a very rude lady. I think maybe she br[ought] problems from home to school; I've had a few teachers like that. You [an African American high school student] can walk in, and it's like they're rude. They

[noncaring teachers] don't really want to help you. You can ask questions, and they'll be like 'Um,' but then, they'll help other students but not you because maybe there's race involved. They don't want to help you because there's I don't know like it's a race thing. It's very big; it's been [like this] for years, but right now [21<sup>st</sup> century], it still is [happening to African American high school students at Running Water High School].

I feel like teachers who are noncaring treat African American students like we're "trash" basically, even if we're the best student [academically and behaviorally]. It [The treatment of students] shouldn't like involve race, but they [noncaring teachers] treat us [African American high school students] differently. Like, we'll be in the hallway, and they'll stop us but not stop another kid. They won't help us, but they'll help another kid. I think that's [treatment is] very hard on African American students because we already know [based upon factual evidence from American history and present-day society] that [because of] our skin people have a problem with our skin complexion. The way they [noncaring teachers at Running Water High School] look at you, act towards you, even if you don't do anything, it's like this aura from them. It's like it makes you [an African American high school student] think, 'What am I doing wrong?' When, you're not even doing anything [wrong]. Rich African Americans and poor African Americans, sometimes they treat you different[ly]. They [noncaring teachers at Running Water High School] might not treat you the best, but you get the feeling like they treat you better or kind of "suck up" to you. I feel like you're

[an African American high school student is] holding yourself [him/herself] back not to [exercise or live-up to] your [his/her] full attention [potential]. It's just like, 'Let them [African American high school students] fail.' I see that a lot. I think that's a big thing in school like treating us [African American high school students] differently than other kids.

### **Miss Journey's Portrait: Consider Our Commonality and Our Differences**

Teachers in general, I feel like it's been okay. I've had some teachers that I think have cared a little bit more th[an] the others. Some teachers took the initiative to like come to me personally and ask me questions about things, and [when] they see me struggling, [they] ask if I need extra help, understand this certain topic, and stuff like that. I'm involved in a whole bunch of clubs and leadership clubs, like, I'm in 10Y, the Press Club, and Waterfalls Council, which is a counsel for the school. We do a lot of things. I think overall it's been positive because I'm in like a whole bunch of different leadership type groups and stuff. One of the negative things is friendship wise I could have been open to like meeting more people and interacting with people.

One positive thing about teachers is their recognizing where the problem is and coming to me personally [and] not sharing it [personal information] in front of the classroom. Another [positive thing] that I like for a teacher to do is not [showing] special attention really just showing people extra attention. Mr. Mouse, he was my algebra one teacher. He was my favorite teacher ever, a good teacher overall, and he retired last year [2019]. He explained stuff well, and if

you had a problem, he'd come to you. [He would say,] 'Well, you know you had a problem here [on the test or assignment], so maybe you could you know write some extra notes and study for the test.' [A caring teacher possesses] I'd say kindness, caring, and considerate to [their] student's feelings. You [A teacher] just never know[s] what that person [student] is going through; so however, you say it or portray what you want to say, [remember,] it could affect them [the student], so I would just say [a teacher should] be cautious in what you [he/she] say and how you say it. [Caring teachers] are very outgoing. They walk around the classroom; they're just not standing in one place. They project their voice; they make it [the course/learning] interesting. I feel like they always keep the classroom fun [and] are always doing different stuff and switching it [the classroom environment and the classroom layout] around. We change seats a lot; you know by chang[ing] seats, you get to know other people in the classroom and maybe ask them for help. Well, maybe instead of going to a different subject, we'd stay on that subject for a little longer, or while we're going through [a caring teacher asks], 'Do you understand, Paris?' Let me think, freshman year, what did he [Mr. Mouse] do [in the classroom that reflected care/caring]? I can think change seats. We did a lot of activities, and he had like different ways for us to learn the same thing. [In a caring teacher's classroom,] I feel welcomed. I feel like I can ask anything. [There is] never a dumb question or feel[ing] like restricted [to ask any question]. [In the caring teacher's classroom,] I think academically everyone performs better because we're all on the same page; we all

are learning at the same rate, and if not, we kind of help each other out. Behavior wise, I think everyone well in high school you pretty much should be okay with behavior, but if not [okay behaviorally] in that specific classroom, everything is kind of like mellow. Everything is going right. [In] Mr. Mouse[‘s classroom], I h[ad] a couple of friends in there, and he kn[ew] that we kind of talked too much]. He’[d] like separate us sometimes just to make us focus and pay attention in class. I feel like they’re [caring teachers are] more involved because they go around while we’re doing work in-class; they go around to make sure that everyone is on task and doing what they’re supposed to do.

[Noncaring teachers,] they kind of like speed through things. They don’t take the time to make sure everyone is getting it so that we [all] perform well, academically. That kind of like leaves everybody behind because if you don’t get this thing then you’re probably not going to [get] the next thing that we learn, so it’s kind of hard to catch up in those classes. Sometimes, teachers they are strict; [noncaring teachers are] stricter on kids that have behavioral problems. [If] they do something in the classroom, you [the noncaring teacher] shouldn’t stop the whole class and make it known [to everyone else] what they did that’s wrong and put them on ‘blast [in the ‘spotlight’].’ That [type of exchange] could even escalate the situation. I feel like they [the noncaring teacher] should just talk to the person [student] after class or maybe before class one day. They’re [noncaring teachers are] very like laid back and kind of confined in a space like at their desk. When they lecture, they’re just kind of pointing at the screen, ‘This is

who this is.' They're not [interesting and], it's not a very interesting class. I had an English teacher; I've taken his class twice now for regular English 11th grade, and I have him now for a college credit English class. His like his way [of] going about things; it's kind of off. You [students] do assignments that wouldn't necessarily have anything to do with the subject that we are in. We would like write essays about different topics. We would just be confused why we were writing them. We would submit them, and he would never put them [the essay/score in the schoolwide grading system] as a grade. [They] would be 2,000 word essays, three to four pages, and he wouldn't take the time to grade them. When he lectures, he kind of makes these corny jokes, and [the jokes are] not necessarily funny and kind [of] distracts the class, so we get to talking about different things. The class is really confusing. Another teacher was a lady, and I h[ad her] for econ [economics] this year last semester. We would do the assignment and do it wrong. She would kind of act like we were dumb or stupid. [She assumed that be]cause we're seniors, we're supposed to know, but it was like the way she was addressing topics, I felt like. I feel like she was a noncaring teacher because the way she would explain assignments, we wouldn't understand what she was talking [about].

African American high school students, I wouldn't say [are] not willing to ask questions, but you might as well not want to ask questions because if you ask them, they're [noncaring teachers for African American high school students are] not really going to answer the question. You kind of have to ask your classmates,



and if they don't know then you guys are all kind of like stuck. That's [what happens] in a noncaring [teacher's] classroom, but in a caring [teacher's] classroom, you guys are all getting [understanding] it [the material/information/assignment] and are learning together. Everyone [person/student] is brought up differently. Everyone has their own type [of] culture, and their [own] different types of norms. I think that everyone [should] just be respectful and mindful of [other's] feelings. You just never know what that person is going through that day. Sometimes, I feel like in the classroom, we [African American high school students] get categorized all in the same. Maybe we're like more the rowdier kids, but, personally, I'm more of a quiet person. Maybe because we have more of a 'roughness' [tougher sensibilities] to us [African American high school students], but that's not the case all the time. So, that's all I got a say.

### **Portrait Analyses and Findings**

The portraits were constructed from the tape-recorded and transcribed responses of each research participant to the study's central research question, which was follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

and the interview question protocols for each participant group (see Appendices A through D). To facilitate the personal and individual perspective of each of the research participants in the individual narrative portraits, the research participant groups

(administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students) and the collection of research participants (all participants), I determined that the most efficient approach was to divide the participant responses into four distinct categories. The categories were as follows: overall perception (positive and negative), caring, noncaring, and individual perspective. The overall perception category incorporated each participant's views whether positive or negative with respect to their experiences working with teachers and African American high school students in relation to the participant. The caring category incorporated each participant's perspective of a caring teacher; a caring teacher's characteristics; a caring teacher's interaction with African American high school students; and the academic and behavioral responses exhibited by African American high school students to a caring teacher inside and outside of the classroom. The noncaring category incorporated each participant's perspective of a noncaring teacher; a noncaring teacher's characteristics; a noncaring teacher's interaction with African American high school students; and the academic and behavioral responses exhibited by African American high school students to a noncaring teacher inside and outside of the classroom. The individual perspective category incorporated each participant's response to the final and all-encompassing interview question—"Is there anything that you would like to add?" The individual perspective category served to ensure that each participant's unique perception and voice received special attention and analysis.

### **The Administrator Portraits**

The administrators, Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight, who participated in this research study represented two diverse roles, the school principal and the school social

worker, within the leadership team at Running Water High School. However, the perspectives shared in their portraits represented universal sentiments as it applied to caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School from a school administrator's viewpoint.

**Overall perception.** Both administrators viewed Running Water High School as a secondary institution with a diverse population—student, teacher, staff, parent/guardian, racial/ethnic, and socioeconomic. Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight felt as if the teachers and staff at Running Water High School worked collectively for the good of all students, whether regarding academics or some other area of student development and concern, especially African Americans. The administrators in this research study believed that teachers at Running Water High School made conscious efforts to “connect” with the African American students, including getting to understand their lived experiences and cultural norms. According to Ms. Michaels, some teachers held a level of “uncomfortableness” when it came to interactions with and instructing African American high school students that even led to the use of grouping terminology, such as “those people,” but the discomfort was not to be viewed as “maliciousness or bad intent.” Rather, Mr. Moonlight believed that the cultural sensitivity training that the faculty and staff had participated in in the past reflected a positive change in attitude towards African American high school students. This positive change, including a willingness of teachers to “meet [the African American] students where they are” despite their “culture[al], heritage, and background” differences, commonly expressed by Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight was a defining factor that fostered a caring environment.

**Caring.** Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight were both emphatic in their view that caring teachers for African American students must build strong relationships with their students. Mr. Moonlight added that a caring teacher “understands her students.” The use of the pronoun “her” was a common association by individuals within the theory of caring, according to Noddings (2013a). Individuals within and outside of the field of education more often connect both the term “teacher” and the human manifestation of teacher to the feminine singular pronoun her rather than the masculine singular pronoun “him.” Mr. Moonlight’s use of her to refer to a caring teacher is linked to the use ascribed in Noddings’ theory of caring (see 2003, 2007, & 2013a). He expressed that caring teachers were willing to do anything for African American students, especially when it came to “supporting, helping, listening to them, and finding out who they are.” Ms. Michaels affirmed that caring teachers made African American high school students “feel tied to something [someone within the school],” which in turn promoted “absenteeism to go down and graduation rates to go up.” Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight believed that a teacher’s caring for African Americans varied but included both tangibles and intangibles, occurred within and outside of the classroom, and had positive and validating effect on both the academic and social aspects of the students’ life. Mr. Moonlight noted specifically that for the caring teacher, focus on the course content could possibly become secondary to building relationships with African American high school students.

**Noncaring.** Mr. Moonlight made more direct associations to African American high school students and noncaring teachers than Ms. Michaels. Nevertheless, both

administrators shared perspectives that emphasized the noncaring teacher more than the African American high school students. Both Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight identified noncaring teachers as being static inside the classroom, staying fixed in one location usually behind their desk, exhibiting minimal interest in the students academically and socially, and remaining “closed-off” to the students’ needs and interests. Ms. Michaels suggested this type of barrier created by noncaring teachers prompted a “Well if you don’t care, I’m not going to care either” attitude from the African American high school students. Mr. Moonlight echoed this adding that African American high school students neither want to work for or behave in a noncaring teacher’s classroom. Another point that Mr. Moonlight made was that noncaring teachers’ distancing behavior and dismissive stance concerning African Americans resulted in a higher rate of disciplinary actions taken towards them for minor offenses and infractions that led to their “being suspended, expelled, or having to go to alternative school.”

**Individual perspective.** When given the opportunity to share any additional thoughts, Ms. Michaels elected to address her concerns with the Running Water Community and the families of the African American students at Running Water High School. Ms. Michaels emphasized that the community that the high school serves was populated by many adults who did not graduate from high school or go to college. Consequently, this decrease in the number of potential high school graduates in the community has influenced the mindset of many African American students and families as well as has lowered academic expectations. Fortunately or unfortunately, Ms.

Michaels believed that this made educating African American students more challenging and put the school in the position of “reach[ing]-out and bridg[ing] those gaps . . . between school and home.” Nevertheless, Ms. Michaels believed that Running Water High School did a good job of making African American students feel “safe and pushing them” further than they could imagine for themselves.

In sharing his final thoughts, Mr. Moonlight affirmed many of the sentiments that he shared during his interview when he elected to focus on the caring teacher. Mr. Moonlight reemphasized how well he believed the faculty and staff of Running Water High School cared for African American students just as much as they cared for any other ethnic or racial student group. He noted that caring teachers rather than noncaring teachers at Running Water High School created an environment in which administrators, including himself, had to employ fewer disciplinary measures with African American students. He stated, “If a teacher really cares about his or her students, they’re going to do their background work and find out who that student is; they’re going to build those relationships that they know are important.” Mr. Moonlight asserted that a relationship was the source for an African American high school student to “flourish in the classroom,” and the educators at his high school do not “see color, [but they] see people that [they] value [as human beings ‘devoid’ of color].” For Mr. Moonlight, African American students were members of the “human race.”

### **The Parent/Guardian Portraits**

The parents, Mr. Bloom, stepfather of Nathaniel Bavaldi (student research participant), and Ms. Jones, mother of Amelia Brudleberry (student research participant),

who participated in this research study represented the parent perspectives of two African American students at Running Water High School. Both parents expressed in their portrait a uniquely distinct perspective that touched upon common expectations that any parent would hold as it applied to caring teachers for African American high school students, including their own.

**Overall perception.** Each parent adamantly stated that they could not recall a teacher that had interacted with them on any level, especially with respect to their child at Running Water High School. Mr. Bloom felt that the missing interaction with his son's teachers was direct association to the fact that his son, Nathaniel, had "not connected with any teachers on a personal [level]." Ms. Jones preferred to interact with her daughter's, Amelia, guidance counselor rather than teachers; "I don't really work one-on-one with them [teachers]." Both of the parents, expressed in their portraits that no relationship existed between them and the teachers. Ms. Jones' lack of relationships with teachers at Running Water High School was the result of bad past experiences with teachers. Mr. Bloom's noninteraction with teachers at Running Water High School was rooted in the teacher's lack of initiative to interact with his son or him, even though Mr. Bloom was a dean at the high school. Both parents had minimal insight, whether positive or negative, to share regarding their overall interaction with teachers.

**Caring.** Mr. Bloom and Ms. Jones began their discussion about caring teachers for African American high school students by mentioning that their care for the student goes beyond being mere enrollment in the course or their presence in the room. A caring teacher for African American students, according to Ms. Jones "makes sure that everyone

in the classroom understands what they are teaching,” and “want to see them be successful,” shared Mr. Bloom. Another aspect on which both parents expressed complimentary positions was concerning discipline. Both believed that caring teachers would use nonpunitive disciplinary methods to maintain order in the classroom to promote a conducive learning environment for all students. However, Mr. Bloom’s thoughts were more directed toward common practices used in educational institutions in the 21st century, which reflected his role as a dean at the high school; whereas, Ms. Jones’ insight addressed discipline in general. Mr. Bloom added that caring teachers for African American high school students were interested in their students’ outside of school and extracurricular activities and even supported them at times by attending or asking the student about their interest(s). Ms. Jones’ affirmed that if her daughter is cared for in a classroom, “she should feel like well appreciated for one and understood and respected.” Mr. Bloom truly differentiated his role as a parent of an African American high school student at Running Water High School from Ms. Jones’ role when he assuredly said, “I have an advantage on knowing what a caring teacher does” and listed four distinctive traits that referenced things that he did when he too was in the role of a classroom teacher and cared for his African American students.

**Noncaring.** Even though Ms. Jones expressed that she did not communicate with teachers, she believed that noncaring teachers for African American High School students do not contact the student’s parent, whether for positive or negative reasons, and they do not communicate with the student either. Ms. Jones did not have more than that to contribute to this focus of the research study. Mr. Bloom noted that noncaring teachers



for African American students were “replaceable.” He also felt that they “didn’t care because you [the noncaring teacher] didn’t do anything to ingrain yourself in that system, and so, if you can be replaced, pretty simply, you’re not needed.” Mr. Bloom further suggested that noncaring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School held racial biases but neither acknowledged that fact nor felt the need to change or address their biases, and they view the classroom as their own territory and not a shared environment with the student.

**Individual perspective.** Both Mr. Bloom and Ms. Jones contributed perspectives that were beneficial and would have presented a void if they had not been included in the research study. However, most of the information that they shared did not relate to the central research question but did provide insight into factors that could impact, positively and negatively, caring relationships between African American high school students and teachers at Running Water High School. Ms. Jones truly believed that the caring teachers in her daughter, Amelia’s life, were present during elementary and junior high but not during high school. “During elementary school, she had Caucasian teachers, and she had African American teachers, and they were just all so caring,” stated Ms. Jones, and during junior high, “a teacher . . . inspired her to run for student council, and she ended-up getting [voted into] it.” Ms. Jones’ response adds a very critical point to the discussion of caring teachers for African American students by the inclusion of racial/ethnic differences and suggests that the race/ethnicity of the caring teacher is not contingent upon the African American (racial/ethnic classification of the) student. Mr. Bloom did state,

we have a long way to go at Running Water High School with respect to male and female African American high school students and with respect to embodying caring relationships between them and caring high school teachers.

Rather than elaborate further upon his statement, Mr. Bloom took the interview in a direction that breached matters pertaining to race and ethnicity. Ms. Jones similarly addressed these two social constructs within society as well during her discussion of caring teachers for African American high school students.

Mr. Bloom reemphasized that Nathaniel, his son, has to learn as a man [that] Black [men] are on a finite line. We not selling out; you are true to yourself. You need to make sure you carry yourself in a certain kind of way in a diverse world as opposed to when you're back at home with your boys.

Mr. Bloom expressed that for the reason that a few Black adult males were members of the faculty or administration the African American high school males had both tangible and direct support in terms of motivators and role models. Conversely, the African American female high school students did not have any Black adult female members of the faculty or administration to serve as motivators or role models but did see Black adult females in both the custodial and food service staff. Consequently, "African American female high school students emulate the women that they see on television," which Mr. Bloom deemed would result in the demise of the African American female and add to the perceived untruths that society held of her. As an indirect and unknowingly counter to

Mr. Bloom, Ms. Jones shared, “I’m on [pushing] her [toward and about Amelia’s academic success], whether they’re not [pushing her].”

Ms. Jones felt that it was necessary for her to share some additional thoughts about the research topic that were not expressed earlier during her interview. Ms. Jones vehemently expressed, “There’s still racism in the world. It is! They [teachers and staff at Running Water High School] don’t care about your [minority students’] education because they don’t want us [African Americans] there anyway.” These sentiments led Ms. Jones to conclude by asking if White, racist, and/or noncaring teachers “going to care about my child just as much as they [are going to] care about their own race?” This question was also posed by Mr. Bloom albeit with a different focus and tone. In the final analyses, this question was addressed and indirectly answered by the six teachers who participated in this research study.

### **The Teacher Portraits**

The teachers, Ms. Fieldcrest; Ms. Smithson; Mr. Delaware; Mr. Limmerick; Mr. Setter; and Mr. Ombre, who participated in this research study represented classroom teachers. In addition to academic teaching responsibilities, three of these teachers held athletic coaching positions on the staff: Mr. Delaware (junior varsity and varsity basketball, assistant coach), Mr. Limmerick (junior varsity and varsity, head basketball coach), and Mr. Ombre (junior varsity and varsity, assistant football coach; varsity, head coach). The teachers held varied perceptions as to whether and in what manners teachers were caring towards African American high school students at Running Water High School. More poignantly, the teachers in this research study more often than not referred

to themselves when they discussed caring teachers and referred to their colleagues/other teachers when they discussed noncaring teachers. Ultimately, the perspectives shared in their portraits represent common practices and truths as it applies to caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School from a school teacher's viewpoint.

**Overall perception.** The teachers in this study worked with a wide range of students from advanced/high ability to remediated/low ability to special needs/exceptional learners. Consequently, the teachers believed that the ability level of the students' greatly influenced the needs and hence the level of care both required and offered by the teacher for African American high school students. The range of the African American high school students at Running Water High School with whom they worked greatly impacted the levels of ease and difficulty with which caring relationships were formed and the depth of those caring relationships. For Ms. Fieldcrest, Ms. Smithson, Mr. Ombre, and Mr. Setter, barriers—home environments, cultural differences, (negative) mindsets, and expectations—had to be broached either directly or indirectly before connections could be made between them and the African American students in their courses. However, for Mr. Delaware and Mr. Limmerick, they believed that fostering a caring relationship with African American high school students was neither difficult nor discomforting because “they could relate” to the students through shared experiences and race.

Whether it was a more difficult or easier process for the teacher to form a relationship with the African American high school students, common factors presented

obstacles for all of the teachers in the study. These factors included communication skills; negative experiences with the school and/or teachers; the student's self-perceptions; racial bias and prejudices; and societal norms, expectations, and perspectives. Each of the teachers could recall the name, at least the first, and a specific positive interaction, that they had with at least one African American high school student at Running Water High School. Mr. Setter, Mr. Limmerick, Mr. Delaware, Mr. Ombre, and Ms. Smithson recalled more positive experiences overall; whereas, Ms. Fieldcrest recalled more negative interactions. Despite her memory of these negative experiences, Ms. Fieldcrest was optimistic about future positive interactions with her African American high school students.

**Caring.** All six of the teachers in this research study when asked to describe a caring teacher for African American high school students thought of themselves and used the pronoun "I" to alleviate any potential confusion with another teacher. Ms. Fieldcrest declared herself as a caring teacher from the onset of the interview. Whereas, the other five teachers began to speak in generalities about caring teachers and eased themselves (*I*) into the dialogue. Whether immediate or gradual, each of the teachers did not find it difficult to provide a litany of characteristics, qualities, descriptors, and examples of caring teachers for African American high school students, whether in general or at Running Water High School.

Classroom teachers most often are viewed as the leader in their environment and down the pathways toward knowledge is where the teacher more commonly leads students. However, in the frame of culturally responsive teaching environments, the

teacher along the path to gaining knowledge addressed all aspects of student development and achievement and did the following: encouraged fluid teacher-student relationships, promoted a community within the classroom, connected with all students, and welcomed/fostered collaborative learning and interaction (Ladson-Billings, 2009, pp. 66-76). Each of these areas were necessary for building strong relationships with African American students, according to Ladson-Billings. Based upon the perspectives of teachers in this research study, caring teachers of African American high school students do not just focus on the academic concerns and needs of their students, but they extend their concern and caring to the social, emotional, relational, psychological, health, and well-being of their students. Caring teachers attend both school and nonschool related functions in which their students participate and frequent; they support their students' interests. Caring teachers include their student's family whenever possible and celebrate their students' achievements alongside the families. The caring teacher fosters an environment for open communication where the student can share personal and even private matters with their teacher, including matters outside of the high school, such as home life and familial matters. Caring teachers connect with African American high school students on a multiplicity of levels: language, music, culture, current events and other contemporary topics, and everyday conversation. Significantly, caring teachers for African American high school students were willing to "go beyond first impressions," (Ms. Smithson); "are always there for them," (Mr. Setter); "pay attention," (Mr. Delaware); "show an interest," (Mr. Ombre); and created "environments . . . [that] makes them feel like they are important," (Ms. Smithson).

According to all six teacher participants, in the classroom environment of a caring teacher for African American high school students, the esthetics of the classroom needed to reflect certain characteristics, and the classroom teacher needed to possess distinctive attributes in order to build relationships with students. These characteristics include being open-minded, relatable, friendly, a sense of humor, and empathetic. Inside the classroom, caring teachers for African American high school students hold private conversations with students; celebrate and/or display their achievements; engage with students; are consistent; are fair; create a positive and inviting classroom culture; and are forgiving. When caring teachers provide these conditions inside the classroom environment, the African American students perform at higher levels of achievement; are more comfortable; engage in their learning; employ proper manners; and welcome rigorous work. With respect to the actual classroom esthetics of a caring teacher for African American high school students, three teachers, Mr. Setter, Mr. Ombre, and Mr. Limmerick provided insight. “The classroom needs to look inviting and comforting to them,” (Mr. Setter). “Objectives, procedures, . . . and student work are probably posted; it looks nice and vibrant,” (Mr. Ombre). Only Ms. Fieldcrest and Mr. Limmerick extended their description of a caring teacher and the appearance of the caring teacher’s classroom to a specific but different colleague in the high school. Ms. Fieldcrest spoke about an English teacher who “puts her students before [herself] and [her] family.” Mr. Limmerick identified Ms. Turnville; “I think her room is so feng shui. She’s always speaking positive.” Positivity was the overriding sentiment amongst the teacher participants when it came to discussing caring teachers for African American high school

students. However, the tide of the conversation shifted from positive to negative features when they addressed noncaring teachers.

**Noncaring.** The teacher participants in this research study were able to discuss noncaring teachers for African American high school students as easily as they were able to do so for caring teachers. Accordingly, the responses of the teachers were very similar in nature to each other and only differed in slight ways from one another. The most common insight provided by teachers was that noncaring teachers kept their interactions and communications with their African American high school students to a minimum. When noncaring teachers interact with this student population, they only address matters that pertain to the immediate academic focus, lesson, or subject. They do not expound upon, diverge from, or engage in anything beyond that which is absolutely necessary. More specifically, they do not connect or form relationships with African American high school students. Mr. Delaware suggested that this was often related to the fact that noncaring teachers would put African American students into a “category before they walk in the door.” This lack of interaction fosters a teacher-centered rather than a student-centered environment for the African American high school students.

In the classroom of a noncaring teacher, African American high school students did not do as well academically when compared to their performance in a caring teacher’s classroom, according to each of the teacher participants. When African American students perceive that a teacher does not care about their personal or academic well-being, they misbehave, act-out, and disengage from the learning and social environment. Ms. Smithson and Mr. Setter shared that the students became more engaged and in-tune



with what was played through “headphones and cell phones.” Furthermore, African American high school students in the classroom of a noncaring teacher more often become disruptive through either verbal or nonverbal aggression or demonstrate nonproductive and detrimental behaviors and actions, such as sleeping, daydreaming, skipping class, and aggression. Ultimately, noncaring teachers lack professionalism. They also lack regard for the overall well-being of African American high school students. Noncaring teachers are opposed to building positive, caring relationships with African American students. Consciously or unconsciously, their lack of care is transferred into the appearance of the classroom, which is often rigid, colorless, and “institutionalized,” which also negatively impacts and impedes the instructional setting as well.

**Individual perspective.** When asked to elaborate upon any previous responses or to add to the discussion on the topic in general, the teacher participants addressed both diverse and related aspects. All of these teachers in some manner expressed that they welcomed the opportunity to serve and be of service to the African American and all students at Running Water High School, but they each acknowledged that barriers were in-place that made supporting African American students a more difficult experience than other students at the high school. Understanding the African American high school student’s needs—cultural, social, emotional, and environmental—are both fundamental and instrumental to forming caring relationships and are primary in the hierarchal schema. They also identified that not only acknowledging but also incorporating these needs into their day-to-day interactions with African American high school students

fostered the foundation for building caring teacher-student relationships with and caring environments for this student population. Likewise, for a teacher to be able to incorporate care into their instruction and instructional practices, they need to acknowledge that African American high school students (a) are human beings with experiences that are common and uncommon from other human beings; (b) might affect a teacher in such a manner that they might have to acknowledge their consciously and subconsciously held biases and opinions before trust can be gained; (c) who are culturally diverse and similar to other cultures; and (d) with the same basic needs—love, respect, and care—as all students.

Walter was such an African American student as described in the previous sentence. Mr. Ombre shared, “It’s good to see a kid [Walter] that struggles be able to find a situation where he can be successful,” and Walter experienced success because Mr. Ombre cared for Walter’s overall well-being. Mr. Setter expressed that the teachers at Running Water High School were “sometimes the only positive influence” for the African American students. Mr. Limmerick advised that “you have to be able to understand what they [African American students] have gone through before they come to your classroom,” and Mr. Delaware noted that “they [African American students] feel like they’re targeted.” Ms. Smithson felt that “breaking down those walls . . . and barriers . . . makes a huge difference [for African American students].” Ms. Fieldcrest revealed that working with African American high school students “is challenging for me, but at the same time, it’s very rewarding.” This final sentiment expressed by Ms. Fieldcrest accurately captures the experience of all her fellow teachers, whether African

American or White, regarding their caring relationships with African American high school students at Running Water High School.

### **The Student Portraits**

The five African American high school students who participated in this study represented individuals enrolled in 10th, 11th, and 12th grade at Running Water High School. Miss Brudleberry, Mr. Bavaldi, Mr. Mathens, Miss Springs, and Miss Journey were very involved in both their academic and extracurricular pursuits. Each student had definitive plans to attend a postsecondary institution and made certain that their educational experiences would afford them the opportunity to matriculate from secondary into higher education. Each students' portrait expressed different and personal encounters with caring and noncaring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School.

**Overall perception.** For each of the student participants, their experiences at Running Water High School had been positive, and their interactions with teachers had been generally positive as well. Mr. Mathens, Ms. Journey, and Miss Springs attributed their overall good experiences in part to their participation in extracurricular activities, such as student government, club and organizational leadership roles, and sports. Their involvement in these teacher-centric activities offered opportunities for interactions and connections that were different and beyond those opportunities possible in academic classroom settings. Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi expressed that they did not have relationships with teachers outside of the classroom, and this expression was seen by them as neither positive nor negative. “[T]hat’s just neutral, and that means like you

[are] just there to ‘get,’ [and] they’re there just to teach you,” clarified Mr. Bavaldi.

However, this was not Mr. Mathens’ experience. He more so than any of the other students identified specific teachers, Mr. Mouse and Miss Constellation, who had made his experiences memorable and rewarding in their course because of the way that they acknowledged and aided him. Both of those teachers inspired him to work harder and be a better student. These experiences had a positive impact on Mr. Mathens’ education. Unfortunately, Miss Springs faced two situations in which she experienced the opposite impact.

Miss Springs was the only student who identified specific instances that she could categorize as negative as it pertained to her years as a freshman, sophomore, and junior at Running Water High School. The treatment, she believed, was directly the result of a social construct over which she had no control; “I felt like I was not treated as equally as other students, probably because of my skin color [brown].” This perception that she believed that her teachers held about her turned in a positive direction during her junior year. “I got elected as my [student body] class secretary, and I fe[lt] like teachers changed.” Through her words, Miss Springs indirectly expressed that her racial classification as an African American began to matter less to those teachers. The Running Water High School teachers with whom she had interacted as a freshman and sophomore had begun to care for “her” as a junior and a senior.

**Caring.** The student participants in the research study shared many examples of caring teachers for African American students, and they named them. When the students speak about caring teachers, they approach the discussion by beginning with specific

teachers and then point to their shared characteristics. Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Mathens at the onset of their description spoke initially in generalities and then moved into discussing specific teachers; whereas, the other three student participants began by specifically naming the teachers that possessed the attributes of caring teachers for them.

A number of caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School were named by several of the student participants. Nonetheless, the following caring teachers held more significance for the students than other caring teachers: Ms. Maddox, an English teacher; Mrs. Billings; Mr. Unger; Miss Constellation, a science teacher; Jack Jones, a truancy officer; Mr. Northcomb; Mr. Bloom, a dean (and parent research participant); Ms. Fieldcrest, a science teacher (and teacher research participant); Ms. Doggles, an English teacher; Mrs. Whittall; Mrs. Lovely (discipline not stated); and Mr. Mouse, a math teacher. These teachers represent and embody the attributes of caring teachers for African American high school students. When they spoke about each of these teachers, not only their words but also their tones expressed the effects of the care transferred from the teacher to the student, specifically themselves. Mr. Unger and Ms. Doggles were described as teachers who looked beyond color and race. Mr. Unger “just by being there for them [African American high school students] . . . every day,” (Mr. Mathens). “She’s [Ms. Doggles is] a White teacher and doesn’t think about race, put you down, or say stuff,” (Miss Springs). Other distinguishing characteristics identified by the other student participants included, Ms. Maddox’s valuing student opinions; Mr. Mouse’s explaining lessons and curricular content at a student-level of understanding; and Mr. Northcomb’s putting life and student

experiences into larger (life) perspective. These exemplar qualities shared by the student participants reinforce the value that general expressions of care have African American high school students.

Collectively, caring teachers according to the African American high school student research participants can be identified by the way they: (a) speak to students both inside and outside of the classroom environment; (b) make you feel welcomed, comfortable, and a part of the class; (c) inquire about your well-being, academic and personal; (d) help everyone to be and to do their best; (e) are effective communicators; (f) empathize with their students; (g) encourage and challenge students to go further than the students even perceive for themselves; (h) possess and convey joy and positivity through their actions and words; (i) vary their teaching and instructional practices to promote student learning; (j) advocate on behalf of the student; and (k) check for student learning and understanding before advancing the learning or moving to the next lesson or unit. These sentiments were expressed by each of the students in various ways differing only slightly by their choice of words. Nevertheless, these thoughts foster an environment in which the African American high school students feel certain (positive) ways when in the classroom or engaging with caring teachers for them.

In a caring teacher's classroom, positive student feelings emerged from the participants. Ms. Brudleberry's statement "I feel like I can be myself," was echoed and affirmed by the other five participants. They expressed these by saying: "I behave very well, [and] I look to be a leader" (Mr. Mathens). "I feel great, [especially] when they do not care about race. I feel more confident" (Miss Springs). "I am more willing to maybe

work harder for them . . .” (Mr. Bavaldi). “I feel like I can ask anything” (Miss Journey). Not only are these expressions spoken by each individual student participant but also in some similar manner by the other participants in the study, specifically the administrator and teacher research participants. These utterances by the students reflected and affirmed the characteristics that caring teachers for African American high school students identified in research findings of Ladson–Billings (2009), Noddings (2004, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2013a, & 2013b), and Lawrence-Lightfoot (1993). So aptly stated by Mr. Mathens, “You trust them [caring teachers]; [caring teachers] build that [trusting and caring] relationship too with each student, treating each student with the same respect, and giving everyone that opportunity to learn the same way.”

**Noncaring.** Each student participant readily named caring teachers for African American high school students. However, when it came to noncaring teachers, students were more hesitant and spoke in generalities. Actually, only two students, Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi disclosed the name of a noncaring teacher that they had “encountered” while at Running Water High School. Miss Brudleberry shared that during her freshman year in Ms. Doggles’ English course, “She [Ms. Doggles] just gave us the books; . . . she did not read with us or nothing! It was unorganized in there and was easy to pass [the course].” “Mrs. House [another White teacher,] I ain’t gonna say she didn’t care but [she] didn’t know how to talk to certain people [African American high school students],” confirmed Mr. Bavaldi. These perceptions held by Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi of their noncaring teachers were supported by the other student participants through additional descriptions of noncaring teachers for African

American high school students: “They don’t deal with you . . . and treat you in a mean way. Even if it’s not direct, you can just feel it” (Miss Springs); “[Noncaring teachers are] very laid back and kind of confined in a space like at their desk,” (Miss Journey). Mr. Mathens asserted, “I just really fe[lt] like she [an unnamed teacher] didn’t seem to care for [African American high school students].” Mr. Bavaldi conveyed the sentiments of the other four student participants when he asserted, “[Noncaring teachers’] perspective of/on certain students based on their color is of like [they] give up on them before they [get to know them].”

It is important to note that the experience of students, educational professionals (administrators and teachers), and parents/guardians differ, even when they encounter the same individuals within the same educational setting. One of the best examples of this was the descriptions of the experiences two student participants, Miss Brudleberry and Miss Springs, had with the same teacher, Ms. Doggles. For Miss Springs, Ms. Doggles represented a noncaring teacher for African American because she was enrolled in a regular English course that was predominantly African American freshmen. Ms. Doggles’ lack of involvement, specifically not engaging with the students or the subject matter (literature texts), reflects as a lack of regard for the academic success of the African American students in her Freshman English course. On the contrary, Miss Springs perceived that Ms. Doggles was a caring teacher for African American high school students, and “Her [Ms. Doggles’] teaching style, I think it’s really different. She spunks it up.” According to Miss Springs, she was enrolled in advanced placement English courses during high school and was often one of a few African American



students in her courses. This latter example serves as evidence of how each student participant expresses their own personal experience as it pertains to a shared phenomenon—caring teachers for African American high school students.

**Individual perspective.** Importantly, the students in this study represent unique individuals with both common and uncommon experiences as it pertains to caring teachers for African American high school students. These experiences both shape and form not only who they are as high school students but also shapes and forms who they are becoming as African Americans—members of a subculture within the larger human culture of society. Regardless as to whether their experiences are positive or negative, the students do not appear bitter or express resentment for the experiences that they encounter while at Running Water High School. Rather, the student participants embrace these experiences and hold onto them as examples of cultural awareness and connections.

Mr. Mathens' response to the final question of the student interview protocol (Is there anything that you would like to add?) was a befitting extrapolation of what not only African American high school students want and need from their teachers, whether caring or noncaring, but also of any student irrespective of grade level, racial, or ethnic classification. Mr. Mathens voiced, "I think all students should be able to feel cared and loved, and it starts in the school environment. I still think there is a lot more we can do for our [African American and other] students in the community." Mr. Bavaldi declared that at Running Water High School the absence of African American teachers affirmed a lack of regard for the African American student population and furthermore did not provide any living models or goals to which to aspire to obtain in the future.

I just think that we should in this school have more African American teachers cause then that show[s] the students that they might [have the same opportunity]. . . . All you see [who are like] you is like a whole lot of Black janitors, maybe a couple of administrators, but you never see a Black teacher like leading the class or anything like that.

Miss Brudleberry indicated that from her experiences at Running Water High School that gender disparities existed between African American males and females. “They [noncaring teachers] give-up on African American boys, and that’s kind of sad to a certain extent to be honest,” she pronounced. The sentiment of unequal treatment devoid the mention of gender was furthered by Miss Springs when she declared, “It [The treatment of students] shouldn’t like involve race, but they [noncaring teachers] treat us [African American high school students] differently.” Conclusively, it was the response of Miss Journey that brought the discussion full circle to the comment of Mr. Mathens. She adeptly reminded the supporting adults—administrators, parents, and teachers—what African American/Black students experienced at any grade level regardless of academic ability or skill classification at any given moment in a number of classes at Running Water High School and possibly throughout the United States of America and the world.

African American high school students, I wouldn’t say [are] not willing to ask questions, but you might as well not want to ask questions because if you ask them, they’re [noncaring teachers for African American high school students are] not really going to answer the question. You kind of have to ask your classmates, and if they don’t know then you guys are all kind of like stuck. In a caring

[teacher's] classroom, you guys are all getting [understanding] it [the material/information/assignment] and are learning together.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, the experiences of the research participants were presented as 15 individual portraits clustered by participant group: administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students. The portrait narratives were crafted based on the individual interviews conducted with each of the research participants. Once studied collectively, they together revealed what caring teachers were and were not for African American students at Running Water High School. Each interview employed the Interview Protocol relevant for the research participant group (see Appendices A through D). After all interviews had been conducted, an in-depth analysis was conducted for each interview transcript before the final portrait or narrative was constructed and crafted into the 15 narrative portraits. After each individual portrait was penned, analyses within each participant group was conducted, and four (whole) group portraits were constructed to ascertain the commonalities and dissensions amongst members within the research participant group as it pertained to the central research question as follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

The administrators, Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight; the parents/guardians, Mr. Bloom and Ms. Jones; the teachers, Ms. Fieldcrest, Ms. Smithson, Mr. Delaware, Mr. Limmerick, Mr. Setter, and Mr. Ombre; and the students, Miss Brudleberry, Mr. Bavaldi,

Mr. Mathens, Miss Springs, and Miss Journey, the participants encountered differing experiences with caring and noncaring teachers at Running Water High School.

Although each narrative detailed a different lived experience, thorough analysis revealed that many similarities emerged from personal narratives. The similarities converged as a result of an analysis strategy in which I clustered each individual personal narrative portrait in order to create a group narrative portrait that reflected each groups' prevailing vision of what represented a caring teacher for African American high school students at Running Water High School. To provide a deeper interpretation of the portraiture findings presented in Chapter 4, a cross-group analysis of the group narrative portraits will be presented in Chapter 5: Research Reflections, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions.

In Chapter 5, the discussion and interpretation of the study's findings will continue along with additional considerations of the study and its implications and limitations. Chapter 5 will open with a discussion of the cross-group interpretive analysis of the four participant group narratives around the four themes guiding this study's analytical lens: overall perceptions, caring, noncaring, and individual perspectives. Chapter 5 will also discuss the limitations of the study and recommendations to future researchers for extending this study. Chapter 5 will close with a brief summary of the research highlighting implications, recommendations, closing statements, and an original narrative poem that I penned to reflect the summation of my lived shared experience with each of the participant groups as I coauthored their portrait narratives of caring teachers for African American high school students.

## Chapter 5: Research Reflections, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to invite the voices of African American high school students and their supporting adults to describe their relationships with caring teachers. The data was collected from the four participant groups associated with Running Water High School: administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students in order to provide a rich and triangulated portrayal of their lived experiences with the phenomenon to illuminate the central research question (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The central research question was as follows:

RQ: What are the narratives of experience of African American high school students and their supporting adults with regard to what constitutes a caring teacher?

Through the use of semistructured interview questions (see Appendices A, B, C, D, & E for the interview protocols and rationale) and the creation of narrative portraits, each participant lent their voice to this research study.

During this research study, it was my intention and expectation to ascertain what defined a caring teacher for African American high school students at Running Water High School. With that intent, I would be able to fill a gap in the extant body of research literature in the field of education in the areas of secondary education and African American high school students. In addition, my research is positioned to inform those working in the field, such as administrators and other educators, and those outside the field, such as students, parents/guardians (families), policy makers, and other concerned

stakeholders regarding the importance and significance of caring teachers for improving the quality of educational experiences for African American high school students.

Through the knowledge and implementation of the theory of ethics of caring (Noddings, 2013a), teacher-student relationships for African American high school students can be informed and potentially improved. Furthermore, high schools and other educational institutions on the primary and secondary levels can benefit from the results of this study. Educators can incorporate democratic processes to raise student awareness of their rights as citizens and to promote positive social change. By implementing the concept of care into educational practices and environments, schools can become more accessible and better suited for positive academic, social, and emotional experiences for all students (Noddings, 2013b), inclusive of all African American and other ethnic categorized students. In Chapter 5, I reflect on the interpretation of the findings that are a precursor to devising a plan of action to improve the educational outcomes for African American high school students and empowering educators to engage in authentic relationships with these and all students.

The interpretation of the findings' section is further divided into two subsections. The first subsection is an interpretation of the findings with respect to the context of the conceptual framework. In this section, I examine my cross-group interpretive analysis of the research participants within the context of Noddings' (1984) theory of ethics of care. The second subsection is an interpretation of the findings with respect to the context of the literature review. I explore the cross-group interpretive analytical connections between this study and other relevant studies from the larger body of research literature.

In both subsections, I discuss the expanded findings, the cross-group interpretive analysis, comparisons, commonalities, and contrasts amongst all four participant groups regarding the four previously explored themes: caring, noncaring, individual perspectives, and overall perceptions.

In the closing sections, I consider the limitations of the study, addressing both scope issues and the challenges encountered during the research process. I offer recommendations for how this study can be extended with additional scholarship within and beyond the present scope. I present implications for this study's outcomes with respect to benefits for those in educational settings and also surrounding communities. Closing thoughts highlight the potential for positive social change relative to this study.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

For each of the four participant groups, administrators, parents/guardians, teachers, and students, the semistructured interview question protocols guided each of the participant interviews (see Appendices A, B, C, D, & E). During the analysis of the interview responses, four dominant themes emerged from the 15 individual portrait narratives that were crafted for each research participant after close analysis of the interview data (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The most effective way to group the information shared is through the following four dominant thematic categories: overall perceptions, caring, noncaring, and individual perspectives for the four participant groups. Within these four thematic categories, my research indicates that each of the four participant groups possess beliefs, ideas, feelings, and experiences that are both similar to and different from the other participant groups. My interpretation is further clarified by

viewing the findings through the lens of a cross-group interpretive analysis across and between the four participant groups. This deeper level of interpretation of the findings is presented in the following section.

### **Cross-Group Interpretive Analysis: Comparisons, Commonalities, and Contrasts**

This study captures the voices of several participant groups. To create a comprehensive vision of caring teachers for African American high school students, this portraiture needed to not only create the stories and perspectives of African American high school students but also those of the supporting adults, administrators, parents/guardians, and teachers. With multiple perspectives available from diverse groups, cross-group interpretive analysis helps to determine the key similarities and differences in perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018), in this case regarding caring teachers for African American students at Running Water High School. The validity of this study was strengthened through triangulation across the four diverse groups of participants (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To focus this cross-group analysis, I elected to identify a specific aspect from each participant group that *spoke to me* as I reread each individual participant's portrait as well as each research participant group's collective portrait. Through the process of rereading, I looked for and noted the words that each participant group shared as they addressed the topic of caring teachers for African American high school students. I continued this process until I had compared and contrasted each of the four participant groups to the other. To provide consistency across the study while conveying the similarities and differences across the four participant groups, I used subheadings that



were previously used in the reporting of the findings: overall perceptions, caring, noncaring, and individual perspectives. In the end, new portrait narratives resulted from this participant group cross analysis. Several key findings and subfindings identified during the cross-group interpretive analysis will be detailed in subsequent sections, highlighting perspectives emerging strongly from each participant group that offer insights echoed to greater or lesser degrees among other participant groups (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Cross-Group Interpretive Analysis Findings*

Group (participants)	Key findings	Subfindings
Administrator  (Kennedy Moonlight & Madge Michaels)	Our teachers care for all students	<p>Agreement</p> <p>Caring teachers: Display a level of care to benefit students' academic and social experiences</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Engage as least as possible with students inside and outside of the classroom</p> <p>Divergence</p> <p>Caring teachers: Make students feel safe</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Devalue racial and ethnic differences</p>
Parent/guardian  (Rogelio Bloom & Camilla Jones)	They do not really care about our students	<p>Agreement</p> <p>Caring teachers: Take initiative to include the family in the academic experience</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Do not obtain knowledge about students' culture/cultural differences</p> <p>Divergence</p> <p>Caring teachers: Some do not see students' race as a barrier</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Have potential to negatively alter students' future</p>
Teacher  (Jules Fieldcrest, Kyla Smithson, Howard Delaware, Steve Limmerick, Ryan Setter, & Spenser Ombre)	We are caring teachers	<p>Agreement</p> <p>Caring teachers: Exist and they exemplify such educators</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Do not build relationships with students</p> <p>Divergence</p> <p>Caring teachers: Extend their care into pedagogical practices and classroom esthetics</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Are not motivated by biases and prejudices</p>
Student  (Amelia Brudleberry, Nathaniel Bavaldi, Levi Mathens, Hope Springs, & Paris Journey)	We have hope regardless	<p>Agreement</p> <p>Caring teachers: See African American students as worthy and equal, humans</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Treat African American students as outsiders, not deserving of higher standards/expectations</p> <p>Divergence</p> <p>Caring teachers: Do not see color, race/ethnicity</p> <p>Noncaring teachers: Are invisible to all students</p>

The administrator participants observe that the teaching faculty of Running Water High School work collectively towards the betterment of all students, not just African American students. The parent/guardian participants sense that their African American students at Running Water High School interact with teachers who treat African American students with less regard than they treat other racial and ethnic group students at the high school. The teacher participants identify themselves as caring teachers for African American high school students and ably express characteristics of caring teachers as well as noncaring teachers. Finally, the student participant group readily share experiences with both caring and noncaring teachers. In addition, they convey a sense of optimism when appraising the development of caring relationships between Running Water High School African American students and teachers.

As presented in Chapter 4, the portrait narratives provided meaningful glimpses into the perspectives of the research participant groups. However, deeper analysis in the form cross-group interpretive analysis was warranted to provide a more comprehensive consideration regarding how the research participant groups' viewpoints bore further noteworthy comparisons, commonalities, and contrasts within the four themes: overall perceptions, caring, noncaring, and individual perspectives. Consequently, this cross-group interpretive analysis revealed insights embedded in the data and findings that were not apparent from an initial reading of the portrait narratives or presentation of the findings offered in Chapter 4.

## **Interpretation of the Findings in Context of the Literature Review**

### **Interpreted Participant Group Patterns: Contextual and Communication**

#### **Observations**

When considering the focus of the study, which was caring teachers for African American high school students, each of the four participant groups offered insights that prompted additional interpretations beyond the cross-group analyses and warranted inclusion in this section of the study. These interpretive insights lead to a discussion of some of the ways in which the interview responses in the form of portrait narratives, reveal nuances about not only the specific participant group but also the research participants and the perspectives they represent. The following sections offer the interpretations in the context of the literature reviewed for and applicable to this study.

#### **Insightful Interpretations per Participant Group**

**Administrators.** By the nature of their role and title, secondary school administrators—principals, deans, and other administrative/support professionals, such as social workers—display a level of professionalism and rapport that is becoming of individuals who lead educational institutions. According to Noddings' (1984), educational administrators were members of the cadre of caring individuals for students. The administrators in this study spoke more in generalities when it came to addressing the topic of caring teachers for African American students. It is possible that the administrators felt that by naming teachers, they would be showing favoritism in some manner, and as a consequence they elected to identify teachers by using pronouns. Rather than cite specific instances, they maintained a more neutral stance when

responding to interview questions. In direct relation to this point, the administrators were very discreet in their responses. Lynn et al. (2010) argued that African American school administrators often have perceptions about African American students that were rooted in the students' culture and community. Pollock and Briscoe (2020) argued that not only did African American administrators hold perceptions about African American students that were directly connected to their beliefs about the African American culture, but White administrators held such views as well. These underlying perceptions could be a reason for the lack of specificity by either of the two administrator participants in this study. At no point during the interview did an administrator divulge any details or instances that could be deemed as telling to the day-to-day happenings in the building, especially any matters that would or could be seen in a negative light on their management, the school culture, or the faculty/staff and student body. This inhibition to disclose potentially unfavorable information is the likely reason why administrators, to a degree greater than any other participant group, actively avoided identifying teachers by name, whether uncaring or caring.

**Parents/guardians.** Perhaps, the most common roles for a parent/guardian's involvement in their student's high school experience is as a go-between and an advocate. These roles are long-standing but are well represented by the landmark fight undertaken by the parents of African American students for equality in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). While parent/guardian participant responses suggested that these two roles were both important and vital to fostering the success of African American high school students (including their own), neither parent/guardian admitted to initiating or fostering

a relationship with their student's teachers. Instead, the parent/guardian participants explicitly mentioned that they did not have much interaction with teachers, whether past or present, at Running Water High School. Predictably, this lack of interaction with teachers is perceptible in their inability to identify experiences or interactions with caring teachers for African American high school students. Even so, the parent/guardian participants had more negative perceptions of teachers at Running Water High School than any other participant groups and indeed had very few positive perceptions. It is possible that their experiences were related to factors, such as the achievement gap and the discipline gap (see Gregory et al., 2010) and the absence of culturally responsive teaching and training (see Ladson-Billings, 2009), in the high school. Parent/Guardian perceptions are further reinforced by media reports of the lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity by educators and other members of society towards African American youth. Social science research about the academic and/or racial disparities and failing schools in the United States, particularly those populated by African American and other racial minority students, also lent insight into the perceptions held by the parents/guardians (see Kohnen & Lacy, 2018; Windle, 2017).

Fedders (2018) noted that several factors, including socioeconomics and the parent's educational attainment level, play a significant role in an African American students' academic success. It is quite possible that the parent/guardian participants in this study either on their own volition or as the result of some personal experience with teachers in the past feel uncomfortable initiating contact with the student's teachers. All of these influences likely help to explain why. While the parent/guardian participants

share an equal number of characteristics (nine each) for caring and noncaring teachers during their interviews, they ultimately provide more detailed descriptions for noncaring teachers than for caring teachers.

**Teachers.** From a logical standpoint, it is a rare occasion when an individual identifies as being less than proficient at their craft or profession. Teachers are no exception, and similarly, they do not want to be identified as noncaring educators. Ellerbrock and Kiefer (2014) reported that adolescent youth need to develop relationships with adults, especially teachers, in order to have a sense of community within a school environment. Relatedly, the teacher participants in this study connect on a personal level when identifying characteristics of a caring teacher, and they explicitly and unabashedly include themselves in their descriptors. Conversely, the teacher participants never referred to themselves when discussing noncaring teachers but were not hesitant to indirectly identify their colleagues in such a manner.

Notable differences in perspectives arise between the male and female teachers as well as the White and African American teachers when discussing both caring and noncaring teachers. The female teachers spoke about the families and the affect/effect of the family's interactions with teachers (both good and bad) more so than the male teachers. This aligned with Noddings' theory of care (1984). According to Noddings, the theory of care is most often connected to the feminine or female gender. Noddings (1984) observed that more often women are deemed the individuals who are most likely by nature to care (be nurturing, motherly, and caring towards others and things), especially for all those within their families. When the female teacher participants shared

their responses to the interview questions, they frequently mentioned the family context of the student. In contrast, the male teacher participants more often addressed aspects and matters apparent and tangible within the classroom or school environment.

Another noteworthy difference among teacher participants fall along a racial divide. This line was drawn between the African American/Black and the White teachers. While Lynn et al. (2010) found that teachers from different racial and ethnic groups similarly perceive African American students, the findings from this study showed a clear divide. The African American/Black teachers addressed matters of equality, equity, and diversity more than the White teachers when describing characteristics for caring and noncaring teachers. By doing this, the African American/Black and White teachers demonstrate that race and ethnicity do have a bearing on the treatment of the African American students at Running Water High School when it comes to how they are cared or not cared for by their teachers. It is conceivable that the African American/Black teachers are comfortable and familiar with including and addressing matters of race/ethnicity when it pertains to the African American students' experiences in high school. Furthermore, due to their racial/ethnic identification, they are able to not only empathize with these students but also are able to relate to similar experiences, whether as former students themselves or as professionals within the field of education. The White teachers did not mention race/ethnicity with respect to the experiences of African American high school students. It is possible that they did not address matters of race or ethnicity because they are not aware of this perception as an important distinction or are aware of the differences in treatment but do



not feel as free to address. These differing experiences reflect what Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) identified as the color gap, a theory that purports that a difference in treatment and perception existed between students and their teachers, especially when they were not of the same racial/ethnic classification. Encouragingly, there are some existing pedagogical practices that can aid in addressing the color gap. One such practice is multicultural education.

In their descriptions of caring and noncaring teachers, each teacher was able to identify an African American student whom they had taught and associated positive experiences. Their discussions and descriptions were reflective, detailed, and indicated that they were caring teachers and exhibited many characteristics of caring teachers as they cared authentically for their African American students (see Appendix F). Ladson-Billings (2009) noted that White and Black teachers in her study possessed caring characteristics and demonstrated these as they interacted with African American students. According to the teacher participants in this study, they worked daily inside and outside of the classroom to foster an environment for African American high school students in which judgement was not based on “the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” echoing the well-recognized sentiment expressed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his *I have a dream* speech (1963, p. 5). Madhlangobe and Gordon (2012) purported that African American students were more likely to succeed if strong relationships were formed with teachers. The teachers in this study work to counteract the effect felt from other noncaring teachers by being empathetic, nonbiased, nurturing, and loving teachers for African American students at Running Water High School. Their ability to explicitly

reflect on attributes of caring teachers further affirm that the teacher participants know themselves to be caring teachers for African American and all students. Ultimately, the teacher participants in this study strive to build such relationships with their African American students at Running Water High School.

As a related observation, the teacher participants in the study provided the most exhaustive list of descriptors of caring and noncaring teachers; the student participants followed next. The administrator participants came next, and the parent/guardian participants identified the least number of caring and noncaring characteristics. While the greater number of teacher (six) and student (five) participants might help to explain the greater number of caring and noncaring characteristics, the context, depth, and focus of the examples shared by the research participants aid significantly in identifying that those closest to the relationship between teacher and student are the best positioned to respond and contribute to this compilation of characteristics (see Appendix G).

**Students.** African American high school students, like all high school students, want to have positive experiences throughout and be shaped in positive ways by the people and the things that they experience during their high school years. The review of the literature for this study show that very few examples in the current body of research literature portray or convey the voices and experiences of African American high school students. Based on this gap in the research literature, I felt that it was necessary to fill this void and give voice to African American high school students, specifically as it pertained to caring teachers. The five student participants in this research study eagerly volunteered and shared their high school experience. Through the telling of their lived

experiences, each student conveyed feelings that were echoed by their administrators, parents, and teachers, supporting adults, as well as one another.

Students are more invested in caring relationships where they feel authentically supported and acknowledged as African Americans. This insight aligns with what Anderson et al. (2019) and Wentzel et al. (2018) described in their research when they discussed that a student's transition into and through high school was more likely to be positive and rewarding if the student felt connected with not only the academics but also the school community, including the system and the people. My research findings further support the rationale for the students' being more candid and providing articulate details and characteristics of caring and noncaring more than the teachers and administrators in the study. The student participants know and interact with teachers at Running Water High School in ways that are different from their administrators, teachers, and non-African American peers. While providing vivid details regarding their experiences, the students express their connectedness to not only their academics but also and possibly even more telling their connections with the teachers, administrators, and other personnel within the high school community. Even if their experiences are not entirely positive, the student participants offer strategies for how they were able to turn negative experiences into positive learned lessons.

When discussing both caring and noncaring teachers for African American high school students, the student participants were more oriented to identify humanistic characteristics that would both apply and be beneficial to all students regardless of race or ethnicity. This finding is consistent with that of Cholewa et al. (2012) who noted that

culturally responsive teaching benefits all students and at the same time takes into consideration racial, ethnic, and cultural differences. Yet, in this study, the students express very minimal exposure to culturally responsive teaching/teachers in their portrait narratives. The students are however aware of instances of equal treatment and are also sensitive to the fact that they are not always granted equal treatment. Another observation reflective only of the student participants' responses is their acknowledgement of race/ethnicity as being a dominating barrier with respect to opportunity, access, and success academically (within the school) and socially (outside of the school/society). This specific mention of race/ethnicity by the students as a barrier to their success might well have affirmed Allen and Liou (2019), Nadelson et al. (2019), and Radd and Grosland (2019); each postulated that some White teachers' biases and beliefs toward racially/ethnically diverse students could be classified as racist. The student participants in this study did not categorize the unequal treatment as "racist" even when the teacher was noncaring in their perspective.

The students were more inclined than any other participant group to specify and identify teachers that represented both caring and noncaring, and at times, disclosed the name of the specific teacher. Even further, the students named several of the same teachers, whether identified as caring or noncaring, during their interviews. In so doing, the students share that they have made significant connections, whether positive or negative, with both caring and noncaring teachers. Valenzuela (1999) coined the concept of "aesthetic caring," which exemplifies the type of caring that many of the student participants experienced directly and indirectly with teachers at Running Water High

School. Aesthetic caring is in opposition to “authentic caring.” In schools, authentic caring involves meaningful and real relationships (deep level) between students and teachers. Aesthetic caring occurs when teachers do not and/or choose not to form real and meaningful relationships with their students, which keep relationships at a surface level (Valenzuela, 1999). These categories can be seen in many of the characteristics identified not only by the student participants but also by the other participant groups. The upper class wo/men (students; junior and senior grade level) were particularly candid in their discussion about caring and noncaring teachers and their experiences with them. This can perhaps be a tribute to the fact that they have had more experiences that intimate issues about relationships, race/ethnicity, equality, and equity within schools and feel empowered and perhaps even obliged to share and discuss their insights with others. Ultimately, as the students share their lived experiences, their independent voices begin to merge and sound like a “five-part harmony” that echoes the sentiments valuing human interaction and the need to be appreciated, respected, honored, and cared for most of all within the school environment.

**All participant groups.** In summary, overall, each participant group provided more characteristics of caring teachers than noncaring teachers for African American students at Running Water High School. It was the teacher and student participant groups that provided a greater number of characteristics for both caring teachers and noncaring teachers. According to Ladson-Billings (2009), teachers both possessed and demonstrated the ethics of care in their day-to-day professional responsibilities, this empirical data helps to explain why the teacher group in this study would be inclined to

share more caring characteristics. A rationale for the validity of the student group's characteristics can be found in the work of Lynn et al. (2010) who noted that students have keen perceptions and are able to detect the attitude that a teacher has towards a student, whether positive (caring) or negative (noncaring).

Administrators and teachers to a lesser degree were the groups who spoke to cultural aspects, including knowledge of cultural differences, cultural awareness, cultural practices, background, and/or heritage. The lack of inclusion of cultural and heritage aspects could be the result of a lack of knowledge and/or comfort level with such considerations for certain teacher populations as referenced by Lac and Diamond (2019). Also, this lack is too regularly a missing but necessary aspect of teacher/educator efficacy. The parent/guardians and students exhibited more liberty when discussing matters pertaining to race, ethnicity, and racial bias and discrimination as it applied to caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School. This freedom was possibly due to their role as individuals directly rooted and/or racially/ethnically familiar with the research topic and possessing a vested interest in the research findings, a stance directly related to social capital and racial socialization according to Trask-Tate et al. (2014).

It is possible that when any participant in this study responded to a question during their interview they neither framed their response nor their thought within the context of a teacher who works with African American high school students. Rather, the participants thought about and responded within the context of all teacher-student interactions and relationships. This possibility is rooted in the simplest expression: care

is care, and caring is caring. Regardless of the manner in which an individual elects to phrase or state it, when considering authentic relationships between teachers and students, what a caring teacher does for African American high school students is the same for all other ethnic and racial group high school students. Ladson-Billings (2009) conveyed this position in her seminal work, *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African American children*.

There are a variety of factors to acknowledge and consider with respect to care/caring for African American high school students. Rules, policies, procedures, and structure (expectations) are minimally mentioned by any participant from each of the four groups, even though *zero tolerance* is a practice used in many public urban primary and secondary schools across the country according to the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2014). Consequently, one can deduce that when African American high school students know that a teacher cares for them, they are more likely to adhere to the rules, policies, procedures, and structure (expectations) in place. This interpretation is supported by the research of Anderson et al. (2019) and Wentzel et al. (2018) who shared that African American students were more likely to adhere to regulations when they have defined transitions into and clear understandings of the expectations. This adherence to the expectations fosters an environment for success.

### **Interpretation of the Findings in Context of the Conceptual Framework**

When considering the focus of the study, which was caring teachers for African American high school students, each of the four participant groups offered insights that led to additional interpretations beyond the cross-group analyses and warrant inclusion in

this section of the study. These interpretive insights lead to a discussion of some of the ways in which the interview responses, hence the portrait narratives, reveal nuances about not only the specific participant group but also the research participants and their representation of the greater collective of members within society. The following sections offer the interpretations within the context of the conceptual framework, Noddings' (1984) ethics of care theory, which was further developed in the interpretive cross-group analyses sections.

### **The Administrator Group Perspective: Our Teachers Care for All Students**

**Overall perceptions.** The prevailing sentiment for the administrators, Ms. Michaels and Mr. Moonlight, was that the teachers and staff at Running Water High School worked together for the positive benefits of all students, including African Americans, in both academic and nonacademic matters. This perception contrasted that of the parents/guardians who had neither experienced nor believed that the administrators, teachers, or staff at the high school put the same level of care or effort forth towards the academic well-being of African American high school students at Running Water, including their own. The teachers expressed varied opinions on this topic; some in accordance with the opinions of the administrators, and some were in conflict. Interestingly, this divide varied by gender. The female teachers believed that everyone were positive influences and supporters of the African American high school students; whereas, the male teachers identified differences between the treatment and experiences of the African American and other racial and ethnic students at Running Water High School. The students echoed the perceptions of the administrators in this



regard. They believed that first and foremost the adults— administrators, teachers, and staff— wanted them to be successful and provided what was necessary for them to have positive experiences. However, each student did note specific instances with and examples of adults at the high school who instigated negative experiences.

**Caring.** The administrator participants hold the belief that caring teachers for African American high school students take actions both visible and invisible, inside and outside of the classroom setting, to benefit students' academic and social experiences. The parents/guardians similarly believe that caring teachers are focused on the total well-being of African American students and want all students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom environment. The teachers not only feel the same but also identified several characteristics, qualities and examples that a caring teacher for African American high school students embodied within and separate from the classroom. The students reaffirm the thoughts of the administrators and other participating groups with respect to caring teachers from their student perspective. Nevertheless, the students' list of qualities and characteristics are personally rooted in their shared experience to the extent that they are able to associate qualities and characteristics with specific teachers at Running Water High School.

**Noncaring.** The administrators express that noncaring teachers for African American high school students engage with their students as infrequently as possible. This engagement approach most often provides the most minimal interaction and does not extend outside the classroom. The parents/guardians' impressions agree with the administrators,' but they go further by identifying factors of race and ethnicity as the root

of the noncaring teacher's lack of engagement. The teachers further this description by noting how the African American high school student responds to this lack of engagement, including the students' poor behavior and attitudes, lack of effort and demonstration of successful academic performance, sleeping, verbal and physical aggression, and truancy. Each of the students share experiences when either they or any other African American student has directly encountered a minimally engaging noncaring teacher. Furthermore, each experience that the students share specifically or generally reference racial or ethnic characteristics as a major factor of the negative interaction between the noncaring teacher and the student.

**Individual perspectives.** The administrators in this study positioned all of their responses in their belief that Running Water High School was a safe haven for African American high school students. The administrators, teachers, and staff work to encourage African American high school students beyond their own perceived expectations. The parents/guardians' responses identify a lack of effort to this extent when it pertains to African American high school students. Of the teachers, Ms. Fieldcrest and Mr. Ombre, supported in their responses the perspective of the administrators. Whereas, Ms. Smithson, Mr. Delaware, Mr. Limmerick, and Mr. Setter's attitudes represented a divergence from that of the administrators because they believed that some of the adults did not provide a welcoming environment in which African American high school students could flourish, academically or socially. The students are hopeful that positive social change for African Americans would occur both within

Running Water High School and the community despite their experiences, which reveals a less than hopeful reality.

### **The Parent/Guardian Group Perspective: They Do Not Really Care About Our Students**

**Overall perceptions.** Ms. Jones (parent of Miss Brudleberry, a student participant) and Mr. Bloom (stepparent of Mr. Bavaldi, a student participant), the parents/guardians expressed disappointment that any interactions with the teachers of their student at Running Water High School was initiated by themselves rather than the teachers. The interaction that they do have with teachers is not significant. Only one administrator, Ms. Michaels, broached the topic of parent-teacher-student interactions but only spoke on a surface level and expressed that the interactions were indicative of teacher-student relationships. The teachers reference the role of parents/guardians with respect to the success or failure of African American high school students, especially when it pertains to their level of care for this student population. All teachers mention that parent-teacher interaction is central to their profession, and one teacher in particular, Ms. Smithson, stressed this point. Interestingly, Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi, the two student participants whose parent/guardians were also participants in the study, were the only students who addressed their parent's/guardian's role in the educational experiences, albeit to a slight degree. Furthermore, the comments by these two students reaffirm perceptions offered by their respective parent/guardian. Mr. Mathens, Miss Springs, and Miss Journey, the other three student participants, never mentioned the topic of parents/guardians during their interview. Each of the three other participant groups

have parents who speak to this issue and confirm the prevailing overall perception of the parents/guardians and support their view that African American high school students' parents/guardians have minimal to no interaction with their student's teachers.

**Caring.** The parents/guardians both propose that caring teachers for African American high school students do more than what is required inside the classroom, a point that was echoed by the two administrators. Ms. Michaels indicated that caring teachers help African American high school students feel connected, whether to people for the school environment. Mr. Moonlight noted that caring teachers go above and beyond for African American high school students. Each teacher describes how caring teachers for African American high school students go above and beyond and offer explicit examples of the actions of caring teachers both inside and outside of the classroom setting. The students provide a wealth of information as they share their lived experiences with caring teachers for African American high school students. The students offer in a manner similar to the teachers many examples of how caring teachers support them both inside and outside of the classroom setting. With respect to caring teachers for African American high school students, all four of the participating groups echo the thoughts of one another and exude happiness through their words.

Parents/guardians state that caring teachers for African American high school students take a personal interest, hang student work in the classroom, have few if any discipline problems, reach-out to the family, communicate information, worry about the child. The administrators express that caring teachers for African American high school students are warm, open-minded, willing to do more for the student, understand, build

relationships, and become “like a family member.” The teachers convey that caring teachers for African American high school students care outside the classroom, celebrate students, get involved in students’ life, go beyond first impressions, make students feel safe, engage with students personally and academically, provide for students’ basic needs, work to gain students’ respect, give students the reason(s) as to why they must learn and work, pay attention, provide discipline, make the subject matter relative to students, 100% accessibility, focus on emotional needs, provide a comfortable and organized classroom, forgive, show an interest in their students, and have visible classroom objectives and procedures. Lastly, the students reveal that caring teachers for them (African American high school students) keep you on-track, acknowledge you outside of the classroom, permit you to talk to them about anything, have a sense of humor, are respectful of your maturity level, are understanding, “push me,” trustworthy, “look-out” for everyone, are very positive people, communicate with you, encourage you, kind, make learning and the course interesting, and check for understanding during instruction. Considering each of the participant groups’ perceptions of a caring teacher for African American high school students at Running Water High School, whether stated in a similar or contrasting manner, a caring teacher invests in the lives of African American students by taking a personal interest in the student’s life within and/or outside of the classroom environment.

**Noncaring.** Ms. Jones, from her parental perspective, believed that noncaring teachers do not interact with the parents/guardians of African American high school students for any reason. Mr. Bloom, as a stepfather and guardian, expressed his concern

noncaring teachers of African American high school students at Running Water High School were racially biased against that student population. Ms. Michaels' administrator response was similar to that of Ms. Jones when she suggested that noncaring teachers demonstrated minimal to no interest in African American high school students. Mr. Moonlight's administrator perspective was more closely aligned with Mr. Bloom's when he shared that noncaring teachers' distancing behavior and dismissive stance concerning African American resulted in a higher rate of disciplinary actions taken toward them, such as "suspension, expulsion, and alternative school." The teacher participant responses further affirm that noncaring teachers for African American high school students interact and communicate much less with African American students than they do with other student populations. They relate this to the learning/teaching environment implemented by noncaring teachers that keeps the focus on the teacher, effectively promoting and sustaining a teacher-centered environment. Most significantly and not mentioned by either the administrator participants or the parent/guardian participants, teacher participants note that noncaring teachers functioned in a manner in which they neither attempted to reach out nor try to form positive relationships with African American high school students. The students were the only participant group where the specific names of noncaring teachers were shared during the interviews. Overall, the students echo the reports and experiences suggested by their supporting adults: noncaring teachers for the students lack involvement with them, only address the essential aspect(s) of the day's lesson, and do not inquire about their life or well-being either within or outside of the classroom environment. The lack of effort displayed by noncaring teachers

affect both the types of relationships and even whether any relationship exists between the teacher and the student at all. Consequently and tellingly, each of the participating groups acknowledge the lack of influence as well as the negative impact noncaring teachers have on (their) African American high school students.

**Individual perspectives.** The parents/guardians share deeply rooted concerns during this aspect of the interview that invited their individual perspectives. Both parents make connections to race and ethnicity. Ms. Jones explicitly declared, “There’s still racism in the world. It is! They [teachers and staff at Running Water High School] don’t care about your [minority students’] education because they don’t want us [African Americans] there anyway.” Mr. Bloom voiced his concerns regarding the lack of African American adult males and females in instructional and leadership roles at Running Water High School. For Mr. Bloom this visible lack of role models diminished the opportunities for immediate and future success for many of the African American high school students, and the female students suffered the most. The administrators are not as overt when discussing race and racism. However, both administrators acknowledge that matters of race and racism are factors in the discussion of caring teachers for African American high school students. Administrator Ms. Michaels believed that Running Water High School was a place where African American students felt safe and were encouraged to reach their potential. Mr. Moonlight believed that when an African American high school student has a relationship with a teacher, the teacher does not “see color, [but they] see people that [they] value.” The teachers noted that African American high school students wanted to be loved, respected, and cared for as do all students.

Also, the teachers' observations affirm that collectively African American high school students have shared cultural experiences that are different from other student populations, which dictate both incorporating and eliminating practices used with non-African American student groups. For the teachers, these practices are neither positive nor negative but necessary for student success. The student participants affirm wholeheartedly in their responses that matters of race and racism play a significant role in distinguishing caring teachers from noncaring teachers for African American high school students. Each student in his or her own unique manner brings these issues to the forefront of their individual perspectives. However, as do the parent/guardian participants, some speak more vividly than others on this perspective.

### **The Teacher Group Perspective: We Are Caring Teachers**

**Overall perceptions.** The teachers, Ms. Fieldcrest, Ms. Smithson, Mr. Delaware, Mr. Limmerick, Mr. Setter, and Mr. Ombre, all recalled the first name of an African American high school student with whom they had an interaction at Running Water High School. The majority of the teachers share examples of more positive interactions, and only one describe more negative interactions with Running Water High School African American students enrolled in their courses. The administrators share more positive interactions than negative interactions and directly associated their responses with teachers. The parents/guardians have more negative interactions rather than positive interactions to disclose than any of the other three participant groups. However, only Ms. Jones was able to describe an interaction that was directly related to her daughter, Miss Brudleberry. Mr. Bloom, a parent/guardian, who also worked at Running Water High



School was only able to address a negative interaction with a teacher at the high school. This teacher was a colleague of Mr. Bloom and taught a number of African American students at the high school; this teacher had never taught Mr. Bavaldi, Mr. Bloom's son. However, Mr. Bloom felt that this teacher's perceptions and behaviors were indicative of a noncaring teacher for African American students at the high school. The students name and vividly described teachers with whom they have had both positive and negative interactions at Running Water High School. The students are able to contribute much more insight regarding what constitutes positive and negative interactions than any other participant group. This is possible because they are the participant group that have the most frequent interaction with teachers, and they are the only participant group who directly feel the impact of these interactions and are best positioned to determine, whether they are positive or negative. According to Mr. Bavaldi, teachers who do not show a leaning in either direction "[a]re just there to you," and their presence and/or level of interaction makes one feel indifferent or neutral.

**Caring.** Each of the teachers used the personal pronoun "I" frequently when addressing a caring teacher for African American high school students. By identifying themselves, the teachers provide the most personal insight with respect to caring teachers and convey through their narrative portraits that relationships are key to being classified as such a teacher. Those relationships manifest in a variety of manners. The administrators are firm in stating that caring teachers for African American high school students build strong relationships with African American high school students. Ms. Michaels added that the level of comfort with the student(s) greatly influence the type

and/or quality of relationship. The parents/guardians do not directly mention relationships in their discussion. Ms. Jones, as parent/guardian, emphasized her belief that what a caring teacher did for one student they did the same for all students, including discipline. In some manner, each participant group notes that approach to discipline is a distinctive factor in determining whether a teacher is caring or noncaring with respect to their African American high school students. Mr. Bloom, while participating as a parent/guardian, relied upon his personal experiences as a classroom teacher when he stated, "I have an advantage on knowing what a caring teacher does [inside and outside of the classroom]," and he continued by providing a list of distinctive traits (see examples at the end of this caring subsection). The teachers also elaborate upon the qualities of a caring teacher by listing attributes and examples that describe themselves and other caring teachers that they know in the high school. The students like the teachers individually name teachers with whom they have experienced caring interactions. More poignantly, several student participants identify the same caring teacher. In one example, both Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi independently identified Ms. Fieldcrest, a member of the teacher participant group, as one of the caring teachers. While naming those teachers, the students draw from their personal experiences and are able to create a list of caring teacher attributes as well. Of the descriptors, the following are commonly used amongst all the participant groups when discussing caring teachers: acknowledge students, use appropriate disciplinary approaches, communicate with students, treat students as individuals, appreciate the students, build positive relationships, have engaging and lively classrooms, and want the students to be successful both inside and

outside of the school environment. Beyond their own self-reflection, there was one teacher, Mr. Delaware, who identified a specific teacher at Running Water High School by name as caring for African American high school students. All other teacher participants spoke in generalities about themselves or unidentified teachers.

**Noncaring.** The teachers noted that African American high school students do not perform as well in the classroom of a noncaring teacher as they do in the classroom of a caring teacher. In these responses, the teachers use “I” significantly fewer times when discussing noncaring teachers than when they discussed caring teachers. Rather, they spoke in generalities as they listed common characteristics of the noncaring teachers. The administrators not only list characteristics but also discuss how the Pygmalion effect can be seen in noncaring classrooms. They describe this phenomenon in which the perceptions of one person or a specific group affects another person or group of people to the extent that they act/perform to the level of the other person’s or group’s perception(s) or belief(s) about them. Specifically, the administrators believe if the teacher does not care, the students do not care. The parents/guardians share some characteristics of a noncaring teacher, but they more so affirm the mindset held by the administrators, which was “[that if the teachers] don’t care/[the students] won’t care.” The students validate that the noncaring teacher’s attitude have a direct relation to the student’s noncaring attitude. Of the descriptors, the following are commonly used by all the participant groups when discussing noncaring teachers: lack professionalism, do not acknowledge students, use biased or inequitable disciplinary approaches, do communicate with students and/or parents/guardians, treat students as member of a group/type, do not

appreciate the students, do not build relationships, have dull and lifeless classrooms, and have no regard for student success, whether inside and outside of the school environment.

**Self-identity.** As teachers themselves, the teacher participants unlike any other group exhibited a personal association with caring teachers for African American high school students. During their individual interview, each teacher not only identified him/herself as a caring teacher but also ascribed the characteristics distinguishing a caring teacher to him/herself before identifying other teachers. The teachers commonly associate several characteristics with caring teachers for African American high school students. Of those characteristics, these are some of the most frequently repeated by the teachers: communicate with students, concern for their students both inside and outside of the classroom, have an open-mind, provide a safe classroom environment, treat all students the same way, connect/associate with students, allow for students to make mistakes and grow from their mistakes, take an interest in their students' lives, and make the classroom comfortable and esthetically pleasing.

Among the characteristics that the teachers identified as demonstrative of a caring teacher for African American high school students, there were a number with which they self-identified. The following statements were used by either one or more of the teachers to describe what they do to care for African American students: "I get to know them;" "I make them feel important;" "I look out for them;" "I speak their language;" "I do not generalize or group them;" and "I offer help." While teacher participants acknowledge that these statements could easily apply to other caring teachers for African American

high school students, they could personally attest to the veracity of these statements drawing directly from their own experience.

**Individual perspectives.** The teachers understand that African American high school students have daily needs—cultural, social, emotional, and environmental—that are contingent to their success or failure in the classroom, school, and societal environments. The teachers realize that care is an essential component in relationship building with African American high school students, and they each are intentional to incorporate care in all of their interactions with African American high school students at Running Water High School. The two administrators did not focus much of their response on care directly. In his description of caring teachers, Mr. Moonlight only mentioned caring in passing; although, his description of caring teachers was reflective of what the teachers expressed in their interviews. Ms. Michaels emphasized the need for African American high school students to feel safe and believed that Running Water High School met that need for those students. The parents/guardians place the least emphasis upon care and focus on the differences in terms of treatment for African American high school students, which alludes more to a lack of care. The students express in a variety of manners how their classmates, other African American high school students, and they want to have their daily needs met by their teachers and other school personnel. Mr. Mathens, a student, voiced best the outlooks jointly held by the teachers and the other students; “I think all students should be able to feel cared and loved, and it starts in the school environment.”

### **The Student Group Perspective: We Have Hope Regardless**

**Overall perceptions.** The students—Miss Brudleberry, Mr. Bavaldi, Mr. Mathens, Miss Springs, and Miss Journey—generally attribute their overall positive experiences to their involvement in leadership roles outside of the classroom setting but within the high school community. Two of the students, Miss Brudleberry and Mr. Bavaldi, disclosed that they did not have relationships with teachers outside of the classroom despite their leadership roles, but they were able to identify caring teachers for African American high school students that they had experienced in the classroom setting. Although, some of these African American high school students are not afforded the opportunity to build relationships with teachers outside of the classroom; the relationships that they do build with teachers inside the classroom are significant and have had a lasting impact in their educational experiences at Running Water High School. Ultimately, positive teacher-student relationships are instrumental in the academic success and the personal development of these African American student during their high school experiences. The administrators attributed the African American high school students' academic and social progress to the teachers as well as the extra supports present at Running Water High School (i.e. a school social worker and the administration team of deans, assistant principal, and principal). They propose that these extra supports coupled with the focused efforts of the teachers provide an environment for success for African American high school students. The parents/guardians propose that the success of their students is a direct result of their parental influence and support; home and cultural upbringing; and their students' innate abilities, mental acumen, and personal

drive. Alluding to the portrait narratives of the teachers, the success of African American high school students at Running Water High School is a direct result the type of learning environments that teachers foster in their classrooms, the relationships that caring teachers built with those students, the types of care implemented by teachers with those students, and the extent to which teachers demonstrate care for those students both inside and outside of the classroom. Conclusively, care is essential for African American high school students' success regardless of the participant group but most certainly for the student participant group.

**Caring.** The students collectively identified 11 defining qualities of caring teachers for not only themselves but also other African American high school students. Of those 11 qualities, three were neither directly nor indirectly referenced by members of any of the other three participant groups. According to the student participants, there are three distinctive qualities possessed by caring teachers; caring teachers: empathize with their students, possess and convey joy and positivity to their students through their actions and words, and advocate on behalf of their students (most often outside of the classroom environment). While, the administrators did not provide a list of qualities or characteristics, Ms. Michael did attribute the absenteeism decreases and graduation rate increases for African American high school students to the support of caring teachers. Mr. Moonlight in a very indirect but inclusive manner hinted at the qualities and characteristics identified by the students when he affirmed that caring teachers were willing to do anything for African American students. The parents/guardians identified qualities that are parent/guardian-centered and more closely related to race and ethnicity,

African Americans, than the students. Ms. Jones noted that her African American high school daughter, Miss Brudleberry, would be appreciated, understood, and respected by a caring teacher. Mr. Bloom emphasized that caring teachers for his African American high school son, Mr. Bavaldi, and other African American high school students would show support for the student outside of the classroom, for example, attend the student's extracurricular activities and/or inquire about the student's life and interests outside of school. The teachers looking through their own lens identify characteristics of a caring teacher for African American high school students that are predominantly teacher-centered. Although, the few characteristics that are identified as student-centered speak largely to a teacher's ability to be inclusive, unbiased, nonjudgmental, and to make teacher-student connections with African American high school students.

**Noncaring.** The students are hesitant to disclose the names of noncaring teachers. Accordingly, only two of the five student participants felt comfortable to identify a noncaring teacher by name. Miss Brudleberry identified Ms. Doggles as a noncaring teacher, and Mr. Bavaldi identified Mrs. House as a noncaring teacher. Both students had a parent participate in the study, Ms. Jones and Mr. Bloom, respectively. Both students noted reasons associated with race, ethnicity, and diversity as to why they identified the teachers as noncaring. Ultimately, these two students feel as if being an African American put them at a disadvantage with those teachers. The other three students spoke in generalities while as they listed the attributes of a noncaring teacher. Neither, the administrators, the parents/guardians, nor the teachers named noncaring teachers. Each of these three participating groups provide a similar but not exact



inventory of qualities, characteristics, personalities, insensitivities, pedagogical practices, and classroom environment possessed, displayed, and embodied by noncaring teachers at Running Water High School. Despite the student participants' hesitancy to name teachers who they deem as noncaring, they are not hesitant to identify a litany of characteristics of a noncaring teacher: no interaction between the teacher and the students, do not care about student success, talk-down to students, give-up on students before knowing them/who they are (as individuals), lash-out, do not say much to African American students, do not ask questions about African American students' lives, do not praise you, speed through things (curricular), and teach in a manner that makes students feel "dumb" or "stupid." The administrators, parents/guardians, and teachers affirmed and added to this list of noncaring teacher characteristics.

**Individual perspectives.** The students identified teachers and characteristics that they deemed as caring and noncaring at Running Water High School. Through their discussion of caring or noncaring teachers, the students revealed both positive and negative experiences. Nevertheless, they each express that they have grown both academically and personally as a result of both their positive and negative educational experiences and become better students and human beings. Correspondingly, as a group, the students disclose hurt feelings with respect to the treatment that they endure because of noncaring teachers, and these feelings often center on matters of race, ethnicity, and cultural misunderstandings. Despite the negative experiences, each student remains optimistic for not only themselves but also for other African American students, present and future, at Running Water High School. They are optimistic that teacher-student

relationships, especially those for African American students, are going to get better, and African American high school students are going to be successful and reach their potentials both during high school and beyond. The administrators were also optimistic. According to Mr. Bloom, the cultural competency initiative within the high school had been in place for one year, and he could see the positive changes in this regard. As evidence, the administrators believe that the school culture was on an upward trajectory, and the relationships between teachers and students, specifically African American, are improving at Running Water High School as a result of this initiative. The parents/guardians are skeptically optimistic having observed fragmented relationships between teachers and African American high school students. They are not only aware of the cultural and societal obstacles that African American high school students face daily, but also they realize that the school environment can be a major bridge in lessening the chasms—the divide between school and home as well as the divide between White and African American. The teachers realize that filling the gaps is not something that can be done solely by them or solely done inside the classroom environment. Rather, it will take authentic efforts from each of the supporting adult groups—administrators, parents/guardians, and teachers—in order for African American high school students to recognize, experience, and benefit from their care. In the end, each participant group wants the same outcome. However, at times, they differ on their positions regarding the best means to reach that common end.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The final scope of this study encompassed the experiences of five African American high school students' and their supporting adults inclusive of administrators, parent/guardians, and teachers. As an effect of the inclusion of administrator and teacher participants in the study, the conversations and observations occasionally extended beyond African American to include White and other minority students at Running Water High School. Given the scope and execution of the study, four limitations concentrated around the following areas are worthy of discussion: (a) race/ethnicity, (b) administrator and teacher availability and trust, (c) disconnected and underrepresented student voice, and (d) site of the study.

The inclusion of only one minority population group can be considered a limitation of this study. African American high school students' care was the only focus for this study. While the study's focus and purpose made this an appropriate choice, keeping this student population as the only student group referenced in questions and design also had limitations. Chief among these were the challenges associated with recruiting participants for this student demographic. First, by purposively selecting only African American high school students, the time that it took for members of this population to express interest was daunting. At times, I was not only uncertain if I would reach my intended scope of four to five students, but also I was uncertain as to whether this student population was being informed of the opportunity to participate in a research study, despite my methods of solicitation. A second limitation that the African American high school student population presented was related to their availability, whether due to

academic, extracurricular, or other personal commitments; to transportation, time constraints, and/or to mere interest. Like all high school students, regardless of ethnic/racial background, African American high school students have busy lives, which include clubs, athletics, hobbies, work, and social interests. These interests might have posed limitations to their participation. Another and very key limitation to using African American high school students pertained to the trust factor. Many African American students as well as their parents/guardian's declined to participate because of the trust factor; they did not truly believe that this information would not hamper them in any manner, in spite of the fact that they would not be involved in any form of scientific or biological experimentation and would only be sharing their experiences about caring teachers at Running Water High School during one tape recorded and scribed interview session in which I was the only other individual present. The last and most crucial limitation with respect to African American high school students' participation was the parental/guardian involvement in the study. Initially, I expected that for every student who elected to participate in the study that a parent/guardian would also elect to participate in the study. However, that hope was impeded when the first potential student participant informed me that their parent/guardian refused to be a part of the study and correspondingly would not consent for the student to participate in the study. Ultimately, I was able to move pass this limitation by including students with a parent/guardian's consent despite the parent/guardian's own refusal to participate in the study.

For two of the same reasons, availability and trust, limitations were present with respect to the administrator and teacher participants. Both the administrators and

teachers were hesitant to volunteer to participate in the study. They considered that their participation in the study had the potential to be viewed as negative or unfavorable with the principal of Running Water High School and/or the Running Water Community; thus, potentially affecting their employment at the high school and/or within the school district. It was not until the Running Water High School Principal, Mr. Moonlight, began to recirculate my study volunteer flyers to supporting adults and my explicit implementation of snowball sampling recruitment that more teachers and administrators expressed interest and ultimately chose to participate in the study.

The tendency for student voice to be disconnected or underrepresented in the research literature and the often negative representation of African American students in the popular media create a climate of limitations encountered in the study. The representation that currently exists for African American high school students both in the mainstream media and scholarly research are most often negative. Examples of such negative images as the school to prison pipeline discussed in Porter (2015) and a multiplicity of gaps: the achievement gap (Lynn et al., 2010), the cultural gap (Trask-Tate et al., 2014), the color gap (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), and the discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2010)—all of which are negative. Considering these often distorted, altered, and fragmented representations of African American high school students coupled with the associated gap in the research literature, the inclusion of African American high school students' voices into the scholarly and public discussion is important as well as necessary. Ascertaining a collective perspective of the experiences of African American high school students within the context of an educational

environment would provide a counternarrative to the often bleak portrayal of African American high school students. The lack of existing research studies capturing the voices of African American high school students, specifically in a positive manner, was a limitation in that there were no models of previous studies with this participant population to serve as a foundation upon which to build my study.

The final limitation pertained to the use of only one site at which to conduct the research contributing to the difficulties encountered recruiting research participants. Given the challenges of IRB approvals and regulations when conducting research with vulnerable human subject populations, it was difficult and ultimately not feasible to extend the study to multiple sites. While adding cooperating educational institutions might have helped with the recruitment of African American high school students and their supporting adults, the process of acquiring additional participants would have resulted in extending the time for the study and possibly exceed the intended scope. The limitations discussed in this section are offered to contextualize the study and also to identify issues to consider when designing similar studies in the future.

### **Recommendations**

Caring teachers for African American high school students is a topic worthy of future research as this study has only begun the exploration. In their research, Bonner (2014), Anderson and Martin (2018), Benner et al. (2017), Chu (2011), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Valenzuela (1999) discussed the value of strong and meaningful relationships between minority and lower socioeconomic students enrolled in K-12 educational institutions/schools and educational professionals, including teachers. While a few of

these researchers mentioned African American students, no researcher focused solely on African American high school students; focusing rather on elementary and/or middle school educational level or simply including high school students. There is both room and need for research to address African American high school student development of authentic relationships with caring teachers and particularly for research that captures the voice of African American high school students' perspectives.

This study has shown that qualitative methodologies that incorporate narrative and portraiture and utilize one, two, or three of the following: individual, composite, or group portraits can be effective in capturing and sharing voices to present research findings. Further, there would be value in extending research in this area to qualitative methodologies, such as phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. Such qualitative methodologies can be structured to provide the context for a researcher to become better acquainted with not only the research participants but also the research (field) site/environment/setting, and even promote the creation of a new theory (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To further the research in this study, research questions that expand the depth of insight are recommended for the researcher. Examples of guiding research questions for such studies might include the following:

- “What is the essence of the lived experience of a caring teacher for African American high school students?” (phenomenological)
- “What characterizes a caring and supporting adult for African American high school students and their teachers or parent/guardian(s)?” (ethnographic)

- “What qualities, traits, or actions do caring teachers for African American high school students exhibit inside and outside of a classroom setting?” or “How do caring teachers stand-out from noncaring teachers for African American high school students?”

A mixed methods approach utilizing the respective strengths of qualitative and quantitative methodologies might allow for a broader understanding of the scope of the issue while narrowing and grounding the quantitative findings with qualitative narrative and depth. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, a mixed methodological approach might prove one of the most rigorous ways to extend this research and provide insight into teacher-student relationships for African American high school students.

Another suggestion for furthering the scope of this study is to focus solely on teacher and student relationships as they pertain to caring teachers for African American high school students. While this study has shown that including a wide range of supporting adults for African American high school students yielded insights, it also demonstrated that these insights were distant from the core relationship and not as generative. Focusing on what might be deemed as the most pertinent voices, the teachers and the students, might help future studies emphasize and explore deeper into the most effective practices and interactions and identify additional ways to connect these two populations central to the educational experience.

Research that expands the scope to include two or more sites would be beneficial to furthering this research study. The sites might include public, private, and/or parochial high schools located in the same city, state, and/or region of the country. High schools



might be selected to include urban, suburban, rural, and/or other defining characteristics useful to explore comparative perspectives. Broader perspectives offer the opportunity to identify richer patterns, similarities, differences, and cross analysis of participants from varied backgrounds.

It is possible that the methodology, structure, and findings from this study could be used to inform research into other racial or ethnic student populations: White, Hispanic, Asian, and Biracial. Alternately, future researchers might consider a gender focus, differentiating female and/or male perspectives, either within one racial/ethnic group or within a mixed racial/ethnic group. Recognizing that the world is wide and inhabited by diverse people with varied experiences lends another way to broaden this study, future research could incorporate international voices and perspectives. Collaboration between researchers and sites on other continents would certainly offer points of commonality and distinction that would deepen the understanding around experiences with caring teachers for Black students.

This study brings the voices of African American high school students to the fore of its findings. Similarly, the voices of African American students at other grade/educational levels, primary and/or secondary, are worth sharing and all levels, elementary through middle schools/junior high schools, could prove worthy populations for expanding and comparing the perspectives offered in this study. While challenging to research younger populations, their experiences deserve to be added to the existing body of research literature. Ultimately, findings building upon and forward from this study

could help inform pedagogy, curricula, instruction, and teaching theory and practices in teacher training/preparation programs in the United States and abroad.

The findings of this research can be implemented in various manners that extend beyond high schools. This research can build connections between secondary (high schools) and postsecondary (colleges and universities) educational institutions. More specifically, the findings can inform future practitioners within the areas of teacher training programs and/or college preparation teacher programs. According to Hernández et al. (2019); Hymel and Katz (2019), Grenot-Scheyer (2016); and Bales (2015), educators should want to be knowledgeable about how to work with all student populations, including minority students. Teacher education programs offer the best time and way to promote teacher efficacy (Kozleski & Proffitt, 2020; Sleeter, 2017; Zygmunt & Cipollone, 2019). It is worth remembering that future educators might pursue alternate pathways to the traditional college route including student teaching and alternative certification programs/processes. As such, these findings, voices, and perspectives should be shared both inside the college classroom through curricula, course-work, lectures, and workshops/trainings as well as during short-term and long-term field experiences, practicums, and student teaching experiences. Future educational practitioners need to be informed as to the best practices to put their potential or held biases, perspectives, beliefs, and experiences aside in order to be as prepared as possible to give care to and receive care from both African American high school students and all students at the primary and secondary education levels (see also Noddings 2013a and Ladson-Billings 2009).

As a final recommendation, in-service training for educational professionals, such as teachers, administrators, counselors, school psychologists, social service providers, and other professionals, is proposed. This study's findings would match well with both critical race theory (CRT) and culturally relevant critical teacher care (CRCTC), a subset of CRT, and have been recommended by Roberts (2010) to be introduced to teachers and implemented in schools that service African American students. One practice in particular that is rooted in CRT and CRCTC is multicultural education; however, additional concerns can arise if a suitable or the best approach for the student population(s) is not considered by the educator(s) prior to implementation in the classroom or learning environment. "To implement and adopt effective Multicultural Education programs(s) that emphasize antiracist, social justice, and critical learning, educators and school leaders must have positive and strong beliefs towards the benefits of Multicultural Education in all students' achievement" (Medina Jimenez et al., 2014, p. 3). Multicultural education is an approach to incorporating cultural relevancy into the curriculum that necessitates meaningful teacher-student interactions at the onset and throughout the implementation processes. Classrooms in the United States are becoming increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, and educators need access to all of the tools and information they can get to create connections and foster the best learning environments for all students, especially those who are not representative of the historical or traditional mainstream. Findings from this study might help facilitate connections among African American high school students and their supporting adults and hold

promise for fostering meaningful and lasting shifts in educational relationships as well as promote positive social change.

### **Implications**

The findings of this research study revealed several implications that potentially have explicit or implicit ramifications for research within the field related to African American high school students. Some pertain to practice, policy, and theory in the discipline and others may extend to encompass students of other minority and nonminority racial and ethnic groups. Most critically, all of these findings have the potential to foster positive social change for African American high school students, their relationships between teachers and students, and to inform practices in the field of education.

After close examination and consideration of the portrait narratives of the participants, it is clear that when caring teachers are a part of the experiences for African American high school students, African American high school students have positive and successful academic experiences during high school and post-matriculation from high school (which confirms findings from previous studies Davis, 2017; Talley, 2020). The following are areas where additional research and/or policy reform could have beneficial impact for African American high school students: (a) improved academic, social, emotional, and cultural experiences during high school; (b) improved academic, social, emotional, and cultural outcomes post-high school (during adult life); (c) higher high school graduation rates; (d) higher matriculation into postsecondary (colleges and universities); (e) eradicating the “school to prison pipeline” concept and practice; (f)

lowered achievement gap; and (g) lowered discipline gap. In each of these areas, even a slight decline of the upward slope representing negative outcomes will reflect improvements in comparisons between and amongst African American high school students and their other racial and ethnic counterparts and promote progressive societal change for African American high school students. An individual, especially an education professional, would be remiss to ignore the vital role that caring high school teachers play in the improved experiences and outcomes for African American high school students.

In keeping with this study's recommendations, there exists great potential for teachers to benefit, professionally and personally, when they form authentic relationships with their students. Over time, authentic relationships transform into caring relationships, which promote successful outcomes for both students and teachers. Caring relationships between African American high school students and teachers can promote more eclectic and culturally diverse instruction, curriculum, and learning experiences. Ultimately, caring relationships between teachers and African American students offer meaningful benefits and provide the opportunity for more enriching academic, social, emotional, and cultural encounters for all racial and ethnic group students. Teacher training and preparation programs as well as professional development and in-service training for educators, specifically teachers, could be developed to address the importance and need for high school teachers to establish and maintain caring relationships with their African American high school students. These trainings and in-services could be conducted in institutional, departmental, grade-level, and whole faculty settings. They might also be

provided in large-group and small-group settings on-site or at an alternative location. Even where only a few teachers participate in the offering(s), it is possible that a ripple effect could result given that teaching is a profession where colleagues frequently share and/or model ideas, practices, strategies, and techniques used by other teachers, particularly when positive transformation and results are the outcome. Furthermore, this type of offering might well lead to higher instances of teacher efficacy and result in more teacher retention.

The findings of this study have the potential to inform future policy reform in the field of education. Schools and school systems most often have very minimal control with respect to how they function on a day-to-day basis and/or year-to-year basis. A majority of the power lies in the hands of politicians and their constituents. While some jurisdiction resides in the hands of city and local lawmakers, most of the decisions are made on state and national levels. Legislatures and legislation play a vital role when it pertains to matters of equity, equality, justice, and student success. Affecting policy requires more than simple dissemination of research findings; however, the existence of data provides a foundation for action. It is possible that educators could write to their state representatives and suggest that laws be established to create a more equitable field for African American and other minority school-age children. Such policies and laws would revolve around matters of cultural competency, cultural literacy, multicultural curriculum, inclusivity, diversity, achievement gap, cultural gap, and other inequalities that exist in schools where there are disproportionate numbers of African American and minority students. The above-mentioned policies or laws could have both direct and

indirect impact on educators, teachers, student, families, curriculum and instruction, as well as district, state, and/or national assessments, and access to educational and noneducational resources and funding. Whether educational policy reform happens on a smaller scale, such as in a single school, or on a larger scale, such as the signing of a bill into a law, it has the power to affect positive social change.

Some might ask, “Why now?”, and “Are caring relationships between African American high school students and teachers a relevant topic of discussion or cause?” Please, consider the necessity. Amid the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic, civil unrest reached a pinnacle on May 26, 2020 one day following the death of George Floyd (died 2020), a 46 year-old African American, who was detained and allegedly killed at the hands and complicities of four Minneapolis, Minnesota police officers (“Wild protests erupt,” 2020). The human response in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia (D.C.), U.S. Territories, and around the world to the death of Mr. Floyd resulted in continuous days of protests, riots, and other exercises in this country of the United States of America’s *Constitutional* First Amendment rights (U.S. Const. amend. I). The people had become weary of the status quo, or in the words of Assata Shakur, “And where there is oppression, there will be resistance” (1987, p. 169). Much of the unrest, civil disobedience, uprisings, and/or rebellions has ensued from the disproportionate number of deaths of “unarmed” African American/Black men and women in this country by police/law enforcement officers, an act which has commonly become known as “police brutality.” Police brutality is representative of another *gap* that plagues and too often takes the life of African American/Black youth and adults in the U.S. at disproportionate

numbers. Public opinion, whether conservative, radical, or somewhere in between has been displayed and depicted in the media's reporting (print, Internet, radio, and television, whether mainstream and social) of the events as history unfolded before any direct or indirect watchful eyes.

As the public responded to the deaths of George Floyd (died 2020), Breonna Taylor (died 2020), Atatiana Jefferson (died 2019), Stephen Clark (died 2018), Jordan Edwards (died 2017), Philando Castile (died 2016), Sandra Bland (died 2015), Freddie Gray (died 2015), Michael Brown (died 2014), and Eric Garner (died 2014) along with other unnamed individuals, the names and memories of these African American men and women who were once high school students in some city in America inserted their way, their life, and their legacy into all manner of conversations around the globe (Hutchinson, 2020). Unknowingly, George Floyd's death has ushered in a new type of social movement (both similar to and different from the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s) in this country that has resulted in both social and justice reform (see Clayton, 2018). The restructurings across the country of the ways that police interact with civilians and conduct their day-to-day functions is demonstrative of positive social change for not only African Americans/Blacks but also civilians of all races and ethnicities. From the outcries of those mobile on the streets to the pages of social media platforms to the broadcasts of local and cable-based news channels, one could hear and/or read, “#Say Her Name; #Say His Name; ‘I Can’t Breathe;’ and ‘Black Lives Matter.’” These individuals were compelled to take-up a personal and/or shared cause in the name of social justice and demand immediate positive social change (Borda & Marshall, 2020).



Equally, it is very possible that with public support through various forms—protests, advocacy, demonstrations, activism, research, and curriculum reform—positive social change can begin to address and perhaps even grow to eradicate systemic manifestations of racism and racial inequality in primary and secondary educational institutions in the United States. This country’s history includes movements where individuals with a common vision have joined forces in order to promote positive social change. The parents/guardians and students in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) united, mobilized, used their collective voice, petitioned the U.S. government, and set in motion monumental social change that not only improved the quality of experience for African American students but also all students in this country. Many more instances, past and present, in this country exist in which parents, students, and educators have powered movements, whether by violent and/or nonviolent means, with the hope that favorable change would result from their actions. In several of those instances, past and present, their hopes were fulfilled, and positive social change resulted that not only benefitted those who spoke up but the society at large. I agree with other social scientists who believe that K-12 educational institutions are the place to begin important reform efforts (see Johnson, 2018). Instituting the practice of care in schools and the development of caring teachers for African American students is the reform effort needed in our schools. If we have the courage to use our voices and take the necessary action to incorporate caring practices, positive social transformation can yield the policies and practices that can make America’s schools a beacon of hope and justice for African Americans and all students.

Positive change for African American high school students transforms into positive social change for all students and ultimately for the field of education. In due course, small but positive changes in education for one group of people can change the minds and lives of many people. As articulated by Zinn (2009), “There is no act too small, no act too bold. The history of social change is the history of millions of actions, small and large, coming together at critical points to create a power that governments cannot suppress” (p. 4). In some way, positive change will occur for African American high school students. Whether in minor steps or major leaps, African American high school students’ relationships will improve with their teachers because not only will the student be able to define what a caring teacher for them is based upon their own definitions, but also their teachers will be enlightened as to how African American high school students define caring teachers. Based upon the findings of my research, each of the student participants were able to articulate and define as a consequence of their lived experiences what a caring teacher does and is for them. Through encounters with both caring and noncaring teachers, the five African American Running Water High School students were empowered to lend their voice and their story to the cocreation of a portrait narrative that befittingly represented themselves and so richly disclosed their definition of a caring teacher for them and other African American high school students. Admirably, the student and supporting adult participants contributed in a manner by which this study’s threefold purpose was ultimately achieved in the following manners: (a) to capture the voices of African American high school students’ as they shared their experience(s) with a caring teacher; (b) to capture the voices of their supporting adults—

administrator, parent/guardian, and teacher; and (c) to analyze their responses to ascertain what defined a caring teacher for these persons. As more teachers realize and discern the value in forming and maintaining caring relationships with African American students, their voices will be heard and their practices will become models for how to shift from past disempowering practices to those that regard caring as a core value. As a result of such change in practices, the quality of the overall educational experiences of African American high school students will improve and lead to academic, social, emotional, and cultural success. In due course, the results from this study have the potential to manifest in positive social change resulting in outcomes for all touched by this improved understanding and experience of caring educational teacher-student relationships.

### **Conclusion**

As a consequence of conducting this research, I had the opportunity to glimpse the experiences of 15 research participants, two administrators, two parent/guardians, six teachers, and five African American high school students. Through the interviews that I conducted with each participant, I was afforded insight into their shared lived experiences. Through the portrait narratives that I crafted from their interviews, I was able to capture what is at the essence of caring teachers for African American high school students. Researching caring teachers for African American high school students is both a worthwhile and worthy research topic for the field of education (as detailed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2). This research topic fills a void that exists within the current body of research literature, and it legitimizes the experiences of African American high school students and brings their voice and experiences to the forefront of this discussion. This

study provides a scholarly exploration of the qualitative approach of portraiture and offers a look into the world of African American high school students and their supporting adults—administrators, parents/guardians, and teacher—from Running Water High School (as described in Chapter 3). Although this study is situated in an urban school district in the Midwest region of the United States, all 15 of the research participants can easily be viewed as exemplars for each participant group type within secondary educational settings.

Throughout Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the five African American high school student participants' portrait narratives begin to transcend race and ethnicity and location and seem poised to give voice to all high school students with respect to caring relationships with teachers. Likewise, their supporting adults represent administrators, parent/guardian(s), and teachers can be seen as representative parallel categories across high school settings. So while there is no doubt that this study needs to be extended beyond this single location to expand its validity, this study does present the opportunity to explore and find universal meaning and application within the frame of caring teachers in general and what they do and do not do for all student populations (additional discussion of this can be found in the Recommendations and Implications section of Chapter 5). These insights have the potential to inform pedagogical practices on other educational levels. More significantly, these insights can enlighten teachers as well as other educators regarding how teachers are perceived with respect to giving and receiving care (and align well with Noddings 1984, 2002, and 2013a).

The overall beauty of this research study centers on its relevance and significance for social reform and positive transformation in the educational arena. Chapter 2 of this study made a case for the many links to and chasms between the research population—African American high school students—and the existing body of research literature. Via this research study, the voices of a marginalized and often misrepresented student group are given a platform to contribute their perspective to a valuable topic in the educational arena concerning teacher-student relationships. The cross-group interpretive analysis suggests that their beliefs, ideas, feelings, and experiences have the potential to greatly inform and strengthen the existing body of literature as it pertains to caring relationships between African American high school students and teachers. In the end, the results of this study are directed to the improvement of teacher-student relationships and ultimately the promotion of positive social change.

Whether implemented on the local, state, or national level, policies and praxes in K–12 educational systems have the potential to transform the educational experiences of African American high school students. Without positive measures of reform, broken and misaligned biases, beliefs, and practices will continue to infiltrate the lives of this student demographic. As noted above, this might take many forms, including additions to teacher training and preparation programs that would result in future teachers entering the field as practitioners who are better prepared and equipped to address the needs of African American students. The obvious extension to in-service training and professional development offerings would help both new and tenured teachers/educators to gain knowledge about alternative or modified methods that improve the quality of instruction

and outcomes for African American students. The enactment of legislative policy aligned with these findings could extend this research further and not only improve the quality of education for African American students but also diminish the likelihood of experiencing negative educational outcomes, such as the achievement gap and the discipline gap.

While focused on giving voice to a marginalized group, the broadened scope of the findings suggest that any resulting social and pedagogical reforms would prove beneficial and applicable to other racial and ethnic minority and nonminority student groups. Positive social change can result from the simple reality that African American high school student voices are heard, and their stories are shared. Whether with those who want to listen and are receptive to what they have to say or with those who do not want to listen and are disinterested in the messages, the fact that they have been heard and able to speak truth to fellow members of society can form its own foundation of power.

The voices of these research participants across all groups were audible, whether in sighs, whispers, wails, or yelps. Their voices were rhythmic. Each individual had a steady sound of their own that ebbed and flowed with the voices of their participant group as well as the other participant groups. Their voices were broken at times because they were both contemplative and plaintive about what they had to say and how they chose to express it. Intermittent periods of rowdiness broke through as a result of their word choice(s) but never as a result of their actions due to their passion for social change and personal connection with the research topic. They were always melodic for their

portrait narratives told a beautiful story of their shared lived experiences as captured through the art of portraiture (a style coined by Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1993). Their voices inspire. Their voices inspired me to capture and represent the essence of this study in the form of an original narrative poem, offered in Appendix H and in this closing section:

Does care have a face?

Does care have a face?

Some would profess so,

But ask a caring teacher,

And the response would certainly be no.

An administrator responded,

“Our goal is treat all the same.”

Whether White or Black,

Care does not know your name.

A parent affirmed,

“My student definitely does not see it every day.”

I have never seen it here.

When will things change, and every student be treated in an equal way.

A teacher expressed,

“I embody the attributes of care.”

I show it through my craft without question and without doubt.

The students who have left my class I am certain would not mind to share.

A student noted,

“I have a good idea of what caring really means.” “I can tell you what it is and what it is not.”

From time to time, I sense it even when it is not looking back at me.

“Oh, how I wish that care could be free to live, to love, to call my name.”

In life, it is not fair to be part of a game that you were not asked to play.

My hope is that other African American high school students will be empowered to shed their truth and light without an inkling of shame.

We want to be heard and have much to say about care and caring in this place they call “school” and how its absence can make us distraught.

A researcher reported,

“A part of me has little doubt that members of society will not work it out.

I know that I will look back on this day with admiration and say, ‘My voice made a difference for you and for me. It emboldened others to be and to see that they are of Goodness, Beauty, and Worth.’ We must all embrace the humanity we see because it looks both like you and me.”



The poetic lyrics above capture the collective stories of the participants: Our teachers care for all students (administrators); They do not really care about our students (parent/guardians); We are caring teachers (teachers); and We have hope regardless (students). I am confident that these group stories as well as participant's individual stories about caring teachers for African American high school students at Running Water High School will continue to resound as they are added to the eternal songbook and the existing body of scholarly research. It is my hope that they might serve as the chorus for promoting positive social change for African American and other racial and ethnic minority students, teacher-student relationships, and caring across both secondary and other educational levels in the sphere of education.

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## Appendix A: Student Interview Protocol

Introduction: My name is Larissa McCormick, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting research for my qualitative dissertation, and you have agreed to participate in my research study as a research participant. For the present interview, I will be asking you several open-ended questions about my research topic: African American students and their supporting adults' perceptions of a caring teacher. I will electronically record your responses to each of the questions. Please relax and respond openly to each question. Do not hesitate to ask questions for purposes of clarification and understanding. I am the interviewer, but I am here to listen and learn from you, the interviewee.

1. What has been your experience in high school as it applies to teachers?
2. How has your experience in high school been positive?
3. How has your experience in high school been negative?
4. How would you describe a teacher who has made your experience in high school positive?
5. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a caring teacher should possess?
6. How would you describe a teacher that you would identify as caring?
7. How do you feel when you are in a caring teacher's classroom?
8. How do you act/perform in a caring teacher's classroom?
9. Tell me about a time when you were in this caring teacher's classroom.
10. How would you describe a teacher who you would identify as not caring?

11. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a noncaring teacher possesses?
12. How do you feel when you are in a noncaring teacher's classroom?
13. How do you act/perform in a noncaring teacher's classroom?
14. Tell me about a time when you were in the noncaring teacher's classroom.
15. Is there anything that you would like to add?

## Appendix B: Parent/Guardian Interview Protocol

Introduction: My name is Larissa McCormick, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting research for my qualitative dissertation, and you have agreed to participate in my research study as a research participant. For the present interview, I will be asking you several open-ended questions about my research topic: African American students and their supporting adults' perceptions of a caring teacher. I will electronically record your responses to each of the questions. Please relax and respond openly to each question. Do not hesitate to ask questions for purposes of clarification and understanding. I am the interviewer, but I am here to listen and learn from you, the interviewee.

1. What has been your experience been with working with your child/student's high school teachers?
2. Has your experience working with your child/student's high school teachers been positive?
3. Has your experience working with your child/student's high school teachers been negative?
4. How would you describe a teacher with whom you have had a positive working experience/relationship?
5. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a caring teacher should possess?
6. How would you describe a teacher that you would identify as caring?
7. How does a caring teacher make you feel when working with them?

8. Tell me about a time when you interacted with a caring teacher.
9. How would you describe a teacher who you would identify as not caring?
10. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a noncaring teacher possesses?
11. How does a noncaring teacher make you feel when working with them?
12. Tell me about a time when you interacted with a noncaring teacher.
13. What advice if any have you shared with your child/student about interacting with teachers?
14. Is there anything that you would like to add?

### Appendix C: Teacher Interview Protocol

Introduction: My name is Larissa McCormick, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting research for my qualitative dissertation, and you have agreed to participate in my research study as a research participant. For the present interview, I will be asking you several open-ended questions about my research topic: African American students and their supporting adults' perceptions of a caring teacher. I will electronically record your responses to each of the questions. Please relax and respond openly to each question. Do not hesitate to ask questions for purposes of clarification and understanding. I am the interviewer, but I am here to listen and learn from you, the interviewee.

1. What has been your experience been as it applies to working/interacting with African American high school students?
2. How has your experience working with African American high school students been positive?
3. How has your experience working with African American high school students been negative?
4. How would you describe an African American high school student who has made your experience working with African American high school students positive?
5. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a caring high school teacher should possess?

6. How would you describe a high school teacher that you would identify as caring?
7. Describe a caring high school teacher's classroom.
8. How do the African American high school students act/perform in a caring high school teacher's classroom?
9. Tell me about a time when you were in/witnessed this caring high school teacher's classroom.
10. How would you describe a high school teacher who you would identify as not caring?
11. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a noncaring high school teacher possesses?
12. Describe a noncaring high school teacher's classroom?
13. How do the African American high school students act/perform in a noncaring teacher's classroom?
14. Tell me about a time when you were in/witnessed a noncaring high school teacher's classroom.
15. Is there anything that you would like to add?

#### Appendix D: Administrator Interview Protocol

Introduction: My name is Larissa McCormick, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting research for my qualitative dissertation, and you have agreed to participate in my research study as a research participant. For the present interview, I will be asking you several open-ended questions about my research topic: African American students and their supporting adults' perceptions of a caring teacher. I will electronically record your responses to each of the questions. Please relax and respond openly to each question. Do not hesitate to ask questions for purposes of clarification and understanding. I am the interviewer, but I am here to listen and learn from you, the interviewee.

1. What has been your experience been in a high school as it applies to teachers who work with African American students?
2. How has your experience been positive when working with high school teachers who educate African American students?
3. How has your experience been negative when working with high school teachers who educate African American students?
4. How would you describe a teacher who has made educating African American high school a positive experience?
5. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a caring teacher for African American high school students should possess?
6. How would you describe a high school teacher who works with African American high school students that you would identify as caring?



7. How do African American students feel when they are in a caring high school teacher's classroom?
8. How do African American students act/perform when they are in a caring high school teacher's classroom?
9. Tell me about a time when you were in/observed this caring high school teacher's classroom.
10. How would you describe a teacher who works with African American high school students that you would identify as not caring?
11. Would you share characteristics that you would identify that a noncaring teacher for African American high school students should possess?
12. How do African American students feel when they are in a noncaring high school teacher's classroom?
13. How do African American students act/perform when they are in a noncaring high school teacher's classroom?
14. Tell me about a time when you were in/observed this noncaring teacher's classroom.
15. Is there anything that you would like to add?

### Appendix E: Interview Protocol Rationale

As the interviewee responds to the open-ended questions that are posed, I will carefully listen for the opportunity to ask one more of the following probes (Bodgen & Biklen, 2007, p. 104).

1. What do you mean (by your response/statement)?
2. I am not certain that I am following (your response).
3. Would you please explain that (response/statement)?
4. What did you say then?
5. What were you thinking about at that time?
6. Give me an example.
7. Tell me about it.
8. Take me through the experience.

Appendix F: Characteristics of a Caring Teacher for Administrator, Parent/Guardian,  
Teacher, and Student Participants

During the interview, each administrator, parent/guardian, teacher, and student participant communicated characteristics that they believe caring teachers for African American high school students and potentially all students personify, portray, and demonstrate inside and outside of the classroom environment, especially when interacting with students. Several of these characteristics were stated by members of the other three research participant groups. Below are the diverse but not exclusive lists of characteristics shared by the administrator, parent/guardian, teacher, and student participants in their collective portrait narratives.

Administrators

- Warm
- Friendly
- Smile a lot
- Care
- Concern
- Open-minded
- Never shocked
- Willingness
- Understands
- Builds relationships/build relationships with students
- Helping

- Supporting
- Willing to do any and everything
- Become like a true family member

#### Parents/Guardians

- Personal interest
- Remember things about this student
- Hang student work
- Hold conversations
- Low discipline problems
- Contacts me
- Reached-out
- Communicated information
- Worried about child

#### Teachers

- Care outside the classroom
- Attend/support events
- Celebrate
- Notice
- Put student first
- Very caring
- Involved
- Display student achievements

- Get to know them
- Circulate classroom
- Talk
- Plan lessons
- Go beyond first impressions
- Open-mindedness
- Flexibility
- Empathize
- Care
- Go beyond the classroom
- Feel safe
- Positive
- Feel important
- Talk to them
- Take time
- Take initiative
- Show feelings
- Engaged with students
- Instruction matches goals
- Provides basic needs
- Care about well-being
- Treat students the same way

- Work to gain student's respect
- Firm
- Relate to them
- Look-out for them
- Give them a reason why they must learn/work
- Pay attention
- Attentive
- Speak "their language"
- Possess a sense of humor
- Clear
- Disciplinarian
- A cheerleader/motivator
- Have physical (not inappropriate/nonintrusive) contact
- Make subject relative to students
- Stand out
- 100% availability
- Communication
- Genuine
- Do not generalize/group
- Leniency
- Focus on emotional part
- Offer extra time

- Challenge
- Provide safe environment
- Set achievable standards
- Allow for mistakes/growth
- Inviting classroom
- Comforting classroom
- Organize classroom
- Relevant subject matter
- Forgives
- Stay positive
- Use positive affirmations
- Talk to them
- Smile at them
- Show an interest
- Offer help
- Class norms
- Calm environment
- Relaxed environment
- Safe environment
- Visible objectives and procedures
- Student work posted
- Nice classroom

- Vibrant classroom

#### Students

- Keep you on-track
- Assign earned grades
- Care about progress
- Acknowledge you outside of classroom
- Welcome you
- Shares expectations for class and them [the teacher]
- Ask about your expectations for the class and them [the teacher]
- [You] can talk to them about anything good or bad.
- Have a sense of humor
- Relaxed at times
- Able to adjust
- Open to new ideas
- Learn from students
- Trying new things
- Don't yell or get loud
- Respectful of your maturity level
- Make you feel comfortable to go to them for help or to talk
- You are "on their [African American students'] side" not against them.
- Want them to succeed in school and life
- "Go the extra mile"



- Are understanding
- “Push me”
- Call on you
- Promote student interaction
- Outspoken
- Funny
- Caring
- Make learning fun
- Positive influences
- Love
- Respect/respectful
- Trustworthy
- Kind
- Mutual trust and responsibility
- Build relationships with each student
- [Provide] equal opportunity to learn
- There for students
- Talk to them
- Inquire about well-being daily
- “Looks out” for everyone
- Very positive people
- Hard on you (positive manner)

- Keep you focused
- Always happy
- Communicate with you
- Encourage you
- Spunks-up instruction
- Kindness
- Considerate of students' feelings
- Very outgoing
- Mobile rather than static in the classroom
- Project [their] voice
- Make learning/class interesting
- Fun class
- Do a variety of things to and inside the classroom
- Check for understanding

Appendix G: Characteristics of a Noncaring Teacher for Administrator, Parent/Guardian,  
Teacher, and Student Participants

During the interview, each administrator, parent/guardian, teacher, and student participant communicated characteristics that they believe noncaring teachers for African American high school students and potentially all students personify, portray, and demonstrate inside and outside of the classroom environment, especially when interacting with students. Several of these characteristics were stated by members of the other three research participant groups. Below are the diverse but not exclusive lists of characteristics shared by the administrator, parent/guardian, teacher, and student participants in their collective portrait narratives.

Administrators

- Sit
- Closed-off
- Use inappropriate language when referring to African Americans
- Not effective classroom management approaches
- Do not know students
- Do not find out about their heritage or background
- Do not meet students' needs
- Quick to punish
- Use the word "Colored" to refer to African American students

Parents/Guardians

- Write students up

- Only available/meet during required hours
- Do [the] minimal
- Focused on being fired
- Biased/permit bias in classroom
- Never communicates positively or negatively with parents
- No one to one with student
- More concerned about nonacademic things/matters
- Unprofessional

#### Teachers

- Little effort into planning/grading
- Do not observe students
- Quiet
- Do not talk to students
- Disrespectful
- Late
- Leave early or immediately when they can
- Unprofessional
- Do not have professional relationships
- Self-centered
- Do the bare minimum
- No dedication
- No connection

- No engagement
- No excitement
- Put African Americans in a category without knowing them
- Biased
- Will not communicate or interact
- Ignorant towards social groups
- Believe African Americans are going to fail
- Never ask kids “How are you doing?”
- Never smile or make eye contact
- Never focus on the students
- Their [The teacher’s] problems or concerns are bigger.
- Sits at desk all the time
- Use this section review from the back of the book
- Do not give open-ended questions
- Do not want to know student’s feelings or thoughts
- Quickly get through lessons
- On the computer
- Rooms are not vibrant.
- Put forth little to no effort
- Does not fight for the students
- Groups them
- Has preconceived notions

- Does not care about the student/person
- Does not build a relationship
- See them and all they do as disrespect
- Do not make home/parent contacts
- Rigid on policy
- No regard for student's personal circumstance
- Uncaring
- Apathetic
- No sense of efficacy
- Very rigid
- No room for different options

#### Students

- No interaction between student and teacher
- Give work and no instruction
- Give-up on students before knowing them
- Kick you out of class
- Focus on other students
- Do not vary teaching style
- Lashed out
- Do not care for African American students
- Sit at desk
- Blank face

- Do not say much to African American students
- Don't ask questions about you
- Tension is present/noticeable.
- Treat African Americans differently
- Don't really like you
- Don't know you
- Do not want to deal with you
- Disregard student comments/questions
- No personality
- "No care" attitude
- Treat you cruelly, whether directly or indirectly
- Do not praise/compliment you
- Speed through things
- No regard for whether you understand material or not
- Stricter than caring teachers
- Put students on "blast" [call them out in front of every one]
- Laid back
- Confined to the desk
- Not interesting
- Not an interesting class
- Do not teach or explain so students can understand
- Teach in a manner that makes you feel "dumb" or "stupid"

### Appendix H: Does Care Have a Face?

This is an original narrative poem authored by Larissa T. McCormick, the researcher, and was completed on April 30, 2020. It was inspired by the sentiments expressed in the portrait narratives of each of the research participants. This narrative poem enables the collective voices of the research participants to be heard through another diverse artistic medium of expression.

Does care have a face?

Does care have a face?

Some would profess so,

But ask a caring teacher,

And the response would certainly be no.

An administrator responded,

“Our goal is treat all the same.”

Whether White or Black,

Care does not know your name.

A parent affirmed,

“My student definitely does not see it every day.”

I have never seen it here.

When will things change, and every student be treated in an equal way.



A teacher expressed,

“I embody the attributes of care.”

I show it through my craft without question and without doubt.

The students who have left my class I am certain would not mind to share.

A student noted,

“I have a good idea of what caring really means.” “I can tell you what it is and what it is not.”

From time to time, I sense it even when it is not looking back at me.

“Oh, how I wish that care could be free to live, to love, to call my name.”

In life, it is not fair to be part of a game that you were not asked to play.

My hope is that other African American high school students will be empowered to shed their truth and light without an inkling of shame.

We want to be heard and have much to say about care and caring in this place they call “school” and how its absence can make us distraught.

A researcher reported,

“A part of me has little doubt that members of society will not work it out.

I know that I will look back on this day with admiration and say, ‘My voice made a difference for you and for me. It emboldened others to be and to see that they are of Goodness, Beauty, and Worth.’ We must all embrace the humanity we see because it looks both like you and me.”