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Secondary Teachers' Perspectives About Promoting Belongingness for Marginalized Students

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Michelle Cottrell-Williams

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2025

Abstract

Secondary Teachers' Perspectives About Promoting Belongingness for Marginalized
Students

by

Michelle Cottrell-Williams

MEd, The George Washington University, 2005

BS, Utah State University, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

P-20 Education (Self-Designed)

Walden University

May 2025

Abstract

Although school belonging supports well-being and academic achievement, marginalized students may experience less belongingness than their peers. Educators contribute to students' sense of belongingness, but a gap in the literature existed about how secondary teachers perceive the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. Guided by the ethic of care conceptual framework, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. The research question addressed secondary teachers' perspectives about strategies, enablers, and barriers. The 11 participants were secondary teachers; members of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year or National Board Certified Teachers; and stated they valued equity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, or belongingness. Data were collected through semistructured individual interviews and analyzed using manual, open coding of concepts, patterns, and themes. Data analysis resulted in three findings: (a) Teachers' strategies should attend to both teacher–student interactions and teachers' personal growth; (b) a caring stance could be cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices; and (c) barriers emerged when teachers lacked awareness or knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students. Recommendations for further research included exploring perspectives of marginalized students and those of elementary teachers, teachers not in an elite pool, and teachers who share marginalized identities with students. Findings may influence secondary teachers' practices with marginalized students, thereby increasing belongingness and contributing to positive social change.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my two beautiful, brilliant, unendingly patient children, Elly and Owen. I love you a million and am so proud of you.

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With heartfelt gratitude, I want to begin by thanking my dissertation committee members, Dr. Patricia Brewer and Dr. Rob Flanders, for remaining my champions throughout this process. From the beginning, you saw my potential and gave me just the right encouragement to get me to the other side of this dissertation journey. I am extremely lucky to have you on my team.

To Elly and Owen, thank you for your patience and love as I spent nights and weekends on the computer instead of hanging out with you. In the end, I hope your sacrifice opens your imaginations to the unlimited possibilities you have before you. Dream big, my sugar plum bums. I love you so, so much.

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To my ECR colleagues, thank you for your persistent optimism, passion, and urgency in promoting the work of equity, cultural responsiveness, belonging, and inclusion for marginalized students. Your work matters.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In this study, I explored secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. This topic was important to study because the extant literature identified belongingness as essential to supporting students' well-being and academic achievement, but marginalized students experience less belonging at school than their nonmarginalized peers (OECD, 2019). This lack of belonging means marginalized students are at a greater disadvantage when seeking to achieve their social emotional and academic potential (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Exploring secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students was a way to increase understanding of belongingness and uncover potential solutions to increase the sense of belongingness felt by marginalized students.

In this chapter, I present the background information for the study and the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. I give an overview of the conceptual framework that grounded the study and explain the nature of the study. Finally, I offer definitions of key terms used in the study and describe the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study, including potential implications for positive social change.

Background

According to recent research, students with a strong sense of belonging at school experienced higher levels of well-being and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2022; Slaten et al., 2019), but students with marginalized identities experienced less belongingness than their peers (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Montoro et

al., 2021; Sonu & Bellino, 2020). Marginalized students perceived that they received unequal treatment from teachers (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019) and experienced exclusion and erasure from the curriculum, culture, and community in secondary schools (Rodriguez, 2020). Additionally, students who indicated a desire for better relationships with staff and teachers also reported a lower sense of school belongingness than their peers (Renick & Reich, 2021). Teachers are charged with promoting belongingness in the classroom; therefore, it is essential to examine their perspectives about maintaining the conditions that make belongingness possible (Booker, 2021). Educators are responsible for understanding and examining their role in improving the school community (Slaten et al., 2019), particularly for marginalized students who feel disconnected (Grover et al., 2021).

Researchers have examined secondary (Keyes, 2019) and postsecondary (Ahn & Davis, 2020) students' perspectives about the factors that contribute to belongingness, along with teachers' perspectives about how they seek to create belongingness in high school (Booker, 2021) and enact equity-minded teaching practices in university classrooms (Abreu et al., 2019). Although researchers have investigated the issue of belongingness at school and the perspectives of university teachers and marginalized students, I could not identify in the recent literature studies addressing secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. The current study was needed to fill an important gap in the research.

Problem Statement

The research problem that was addressed through this study was the lack of understanding of secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for

marginalized students. Marginalized students may feel disconnected from the school community (Grover et al., 2021; Wentzel, 2022), so educators must recognize and explore their role in creating connections and promoting belongingness (Slaten et al., 2019). Although the literature included strategies for promoting belongingness and explorations of students' perspectives about their experiences of belongingness at school, secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students had not been studied (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).

Recent studies on belongingness have shown the importance of positive relationships (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Scales et al., 2020) and inclusive teaching practices (Howansky et al., 2022) on students' perceptions about whether they belong and are valued at school. However, researchers had not explored teachers' perspectives about what enables them to promote belongingness, particularly for marginalized students. The literature indicated that researchers who study belongingness need to consider how belongingness is cultivated and promoted to allow students to experience positive academic, social, and personal outcomes (Allen et al., 2022). Teachers are responsible for promoting belongingness in the classroom, so their perspectives about making students feel like they belong and are valued should be examined (Booker, 2021; Scales et al., 2020). Even with an understanding of the strategies required to promote belongingness, adding teachers' perspectives to the literature can further inform how a sense of belonging is created for students (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Researchers need to explore the perspectives of instructors who work with marginalized students to uncover

insights that may inform the development of strategies to promote social inclusion and belonging across marginalized groups (Juvonen et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I explored these perspectives through the lens of care and relationships as conceptualized by ethic of care. This conceptual framework framed the study and guided my research.

Research Question

I sought to explore one research question in this study: What enables secondary teachers to promote belongingness for marginalized students? The research question was supported by three research subquestions: (a) What are the strategies that secondary teachers use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (b) What are secondary teachers' perspectives about the strategies they use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (c) What barriers do secondary teachers identify in seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

The conceptual framework that grounded the study was Gilligan's ethic of care, which developed from a 1993 critique and expansion of Kohlberg's 1981 moral development theory to include the role of relationships, empathy, and care in women's reasoning. Since the theoretical origins of ethic of care, Noddings (2003), Tronto (2006, 2010), and Sevenhuijsen (2018) have extended the meaning of care ethics to include the need for cultural understanding, a removal of gendered constructs to include men within

the ethic of care, and the consideration of institutional and sociopolitical contexts. Ethic of care informed and guided the current study through understanding the reasoning and decision-making processes involved in caring practice, with particular attention paid to the person being cared for.

The four elements of ethic of care that guided the current study were (a) the attentiveness that leads a person to care about an issue or person, (b) the responsibility a person feels in a relationship to take care of the issue or person, (c) the competence to adequately give care to the issue or person, and (d) the responsiveness necessary to consider and commit to meeting needs as they are expressed by the person receiving care (Tronto, 1993). The logical connections between the conceptual framework and the nature of my study included an understanding of how caring happens as a moral consideration in promoting belongingness for marginalized students and the need to examine how teachers understand, define, and measure caring practices that result in the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. Ethic of care explains the need to make moral decisions through the perspectives of context and relationships, with an emphasis on compassion; additionally, those who are marginalized should be given extra consideration in the caring relationship through culturally responsive practices (Tronto, 1993, 2010). Grounding the current study in ethic of care made it possible to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

I used the conceptual framework to guide my development of interview questions for the data collection process. I drew on the four elements of ethic of care to ensure I

wrote questions that would help me answer the research question through the lens of care. Similarly, my knowledge of the four elements of ethic of care helped me make sense of data in my data analysis process. I explain more thoroughly how ethic of care framed my study in Chapters 2 and 3.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative design for my study. Qualitative methodology best aligned with my constructivist paradigm, or the belief that perception is reality. Within the constructivist paradigm, researchers believe learning about people's perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of their experiences is essential to understanding a phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I considered other qualitative designs but concluded they went beyond the scope of my study. A basic qualitative design was best for my study because I was seeking to understand the collective experience of secondary teachers who did not operate within a bounded system.

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. In my research, I wanted to explore what secondary teachers thought about how they try to promote belongingness for their marginalized students. I sought to understand the act of intentionally seeking to make belongingness happen. I wanted to uncover participants' approaches, motivations, and experiences with promoting belongingness and determine whether they perceived a difference in promoting belongingness for marginalized students compared to nonmarginalized students. I also wanted to explore how participants knew if they were being effective at promoting belongingness. A major component of my conceptual framework, ethic of care, is that

care is defined by the person being cared for (Noddings, 2003). Because it is essential for teachers to ask their students if they are experiencing belongingness, I explored the concept in my interview questions, which included opportunities for participants to reflect on and share the ways in which they engage with marginalized students to learn if their attempts to promote belongingness are effective. I was also interested in knowing what barriers participants may have faced in seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students and how their perspectives and practices may have evolved. I planned to interview 10–12 secondary teachers to uncover how they interpreted their experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students and the meaning they attributed to those experiences. I planned to use open coding to analyze the interview data and interpret participants' perspectives for my study. My interpretations were informed by the elements of ethic of care.

Definitions

Belongingness: A fundamental human need; a subjective feeling of being deeply connected to social groups, physical places, or individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021).

Ethic of care: A theoretical approach to understanding moral development and ethical decision making from a relational perspective (Gilligan, 1993). This framework emphasizes the intertwined roles of the person caring and the person being cared for in remaining attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive in the care relationship (Tronto, 1993).

Marginalization: “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (hooks, 2015, p. xvii).

Marginalized student: A student with one or more identities that have been traditionally oppressed, ignored, misrepresented, or stigmatized by the broader society (Bulkley et al., 2024). Marginalization may be based on real or perceived race, ethnicity, disability, English language ability, socioeconomic status, sexual or gender identity, immigration status, or placement in foster care.

Nonmarginalized student: A student whose identity is widely represented in dominant social spaces. Nonmarginalized students regularly see people who look like them in positions of power and influence and may, therefore, experience the positive social privileges that come from membership in the dominant social identity group (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Assumptions

This study was based on several necessary assumptions:

1. Elite teachers who have achieved recognition in their field through a process that included critical self-reflection would be best suited to consider their experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I assumed elite teachers’ practice with critical self-reflection would result in more honest and accurate responses to the interview questions, particularly when thinking about times they failed to promote belongingness for marginalized students.

2. Being recognized as exceptional in the teaching field may have positively influenced elite teachers' confidence and self-efficacy, making them less concerned with looking bad or incompetent in a reflective interview.
3. Qualitative interviews with elite participants lead the researcher to discover unique and important perspectives (Baker & Edwards, 2012). I assumed the perspectives the elite participants shared would provide a valuable contribution to understanding the broader field of education.
4. Teachers who explicitly value equity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, or belongingness for marginalized students would be able to share honest accounts of their perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students compared to nonmarginalized students.

Scope and Delimitations

The participants in this study were secondary teachers in the United States who are members of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) or National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT), who work with marginalized students, and who explicitly value equity, cultural responsiveness, or belongingness for marginalized students. The perspectives of teachers who are not members of NNSTOY or NBCT would also be valuable to explore. However, I chose to focus on NNSTOY and NBCT teachers because they had been recognized for their excellence in teaching by leaders in the field, and they had demonstrated their ability to engage in critical self-reflection through a rigorous application process (see National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, n.d.-a; Redding & Myers, 2021).

For this study, I chose not to include student perspectives because this population had been widely studied in the literature, and it is more difficult to gain access to minor participants. By choosing not to explore students' perspectives, I could not validate whether students did or did not experience belongingness in my participants' classrooms. However, I included interview questions that asked my participants how they seek feedback from their students about whether they effectively promote belongingness in their classrooms. A second delimitation of this study was my selection of the conceptual framework. Initially, I planned to use both ethic of care and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory to frame my study. However, as I developed my research question, self-efficacy theory proved to be less applicable to the scope of this study.

Transferability refers to the notion that the findings can be applied to similar phenomena outside of the context of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). One consideration for improving transferability is to collect data from different settings (Shenton, 2004). My participants were teachers from different parts of the country who teach a variety of content areas and are extremely successful in the field. The diversity in their experiences can contribute to the transferability of the findings.

Limitations

Limitations of a study include weaknesses in the design or methods (Burkholder et al., 2016). One limitation of the current study was that the perspectives of elite teachers may differ from those of regular teachers, which may limit the transferability of the findings. However, the lessons learned in this study may include important insights that

can be shared with teachers more broadly. To address this limitation, I used thick description and contextualized the findings.

During the interviews, I acted as the primary data collection tool, so I risked letting my biases influence the data collection process. As a former secondary teacher of marginalized students and a current district-wide specialist for equity and cultural responsiveness, I had experience with the practice of promoting belongingness for marginalized students and held a deep-seated commitment to ensuring equity, belonging, and inclusion for vulnerable populations. It is vital that qualitative researchers approach the data collection and analysis process from a critical inquiry stance (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The need for critical inquiry meant I regularly practiced reflexive journaling and sought feedback from my committee and critical accountability partners to identify when blind spots and biases may have been affecting my criticality.

Significance

This study was significant in that it may fill a gap in the literature related to understanding secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. The understanding that came from the research may support teachers and leaders in enacting behaviors and decisions that can better promote belongingness for marginalized students. The findings of the current study may contribute to positive social change in education because an increased understanding of teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students may lead to improved levels of belongingness for marginalized students.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented an introduction to the study, including the background of the phenomenon. The chapter included the study's research problem, purpose, and significance. I explored secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students, which was an area of education not yet examined in previous research. The chapter also included the research question I developed using an ethic of care conceptual framework. In the chapter, I described the basic qualitative research design I used to conduct the study and explained the assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on the key concepts related to promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem that was addressed in this study was the lack of understanding of secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Education researchers continue to explore the connections between students' sense of belonging at school and positive academic and social emotional outcomes. Researchers have proposed that addressing the gap in belongingness between marginalized and nonmarginalized students can lead to a decrease in the achievement gap (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019).

Belongingness is a concept that researchers have explored for decades. Since Maslow (1943) first named belongingness as an essential human need, researchers have continued to expand their understanding of the consequences of belonging or not belonging. Although research about school belongingness has shown the fundamental role belongingness plays in students' well-being and academic success and has also demonstrated that students with marginalized identities report lower levels of belongingness at school (OECD, 2019), the literature has not addressed secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

In this chapter, I provide the research base for the current study on secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In the first section, I explain my search strategy for locating and collecting relevant, peer-reviewed, scholarly literature. In the second section, I describe the conceptual framework

for the study, ethic of care. I then synthesize the seminal writings for the framework and trace the development of the underlying concepts that support the central phenomenon of the current study. In the third section, I review recent research about promoting belongingness for marginalized students through four concepts: belongingness and marginalized students, promoting belongingness, care and relationship at school, and inclusive teaching practices.

Literature Search Strategy

I used the Walden Library and Google Scholar to locate relevant, peer-reviewed, scholarly literature focused on belongingness and marginalized students. The databases I used were Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, ScienceDirect, Taylor and Francis Online, Academic Search Complete, Social Sciences Citation Index, Directory of Open Access Journals, APA PsycInfo, APAPsychArticles, and SocINDEX. I used the following keywords in my search: *belonging, belongingness, sense of belonging, marginalization, marginalized, minoritized or minority, underrepresented, secondary or middle school or high school or junior high, intersectionality, diversity, diverse students, multicultural, culturally responsive teaching/pedagogy/practices, culturally sustaining pedagogy, equity-minded teaching, equity, relationships, teacher–student relationships, trust, teacher perspectives, teacher perceptions, teachers, ethic of care, caring in education, humanization, humanizing pedagogy, moral reasoning, belonging uncertainty, and identity safety*. To identify research published in the past 5 years, I explored articles that cited the older peer-reviewed literature related to my search.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded the study was ethic of care, a theory Gilligan (1993) developed as a critique and expansion of Kohlberg's (1981) moral development theory. Gilligan's research in developing ethic of care highlighted the role of relationships, empathy, and care in women's moral reasoning. Since the theoretical origins of ethic of care, Noddings (2003), Tronto (1993, 2010), and Sevenhuijsen (2018) extended the meaning of care ethics to include the need for cultural understanding, a removal of gendered constructs to include men within ethic of care, and the consideration of institutional and sociopolitical contexts in caring. Ethic of care informed and guided the current study by providing a lens to understand the reasoning and decision-making processes involved in caring practices, with particular attention paid to the person being cared for.

While working as a research assistant for Kohlberg in the 1970s, Gilligan (1993) questioned the reliance on interview subjects who were all White, middle-class men. Gilligan argued that by using only the experiences and perspectives of men to develop psychological theories, women's normal experiences were deemed abnormal. In other words, when White, middle-class men were used as the baseline for theory, any experience or perspective that differed was considered deviant or wrong. Gilligan argued if women understood moral development differently than men, it was not because there was something wrong with women, but rather because there were two perspectives from which to understand morality. Gilligan set out to explore women's perspectives on moral development.

Through research with women, Gilligan (1993) developed ethic of care theory. Unlike Kohlberg's (1981) moral development theory that traced maturity from a focus on self to a focus on broader humanity, ethic of care explained moral development as progressing from self to others before recognizing the interdependence of both (Gilligan, 1993). Gilligan found that initially, a young woman focused on caring for herself until she reached a transitional point in her life when she began to feel selfish. The next stage of moral development for women centered on caring for others, often to her own detriment. Finally, a woman became morally mature when she recognized the interconnectedness of herself with others. The goal of ethic of care is the avoidance of violence, exploitation, and hurt; the premise is that the enactment of care through relationships is better for both self and others. The underlying ethos of an ethic of care is relationship.

Around the same time Gilligan developed ethic of care, Noddings (2003) researched and wrote about the role of caring in women's lives. Noddings contributed to ethic of care in two main ways. First, Noddings clarified that ethic of care is not only in the domain of women but rather is the more feminine approach to morality and relationship. Second, Noddings delineated the roles of the person caring and the person cared for. In the field of education, the person caring is the teacher, who may either care about students in the abstract and from a distance or care for students by developing a caring relationship responsive to the students' care needs. The student, who is the person cared for, determines whether the teacher adequately cares for them based on whether they perceive the teacher's actions as caring. Both the person caring and the person cared

for play an essential role in the care relationship. For care to exist, the person caring must engage with the person cared for to determine whether the intended care is received.

Ethic of care was further expanded by Tronto's (1993) efforts to center human care and interdependence by questioning the role of gender, race, and class in social structures. Tronto took a critical approach to interrogate the traditional perspectives of feminist theory, including ethic of care, that centered on the experiences of White women. Tronto highlighted how these theories ignored the realities of women of color and other marginalized communities who often lived radically different lives from feminist scholars. Furthermore, Tronto explained a morality of caring was not inherent to women alone; men were also capable of moral caring but were often discouraged from it by the existing social boundaries of gender expectations. Tronto encouraged researchers to consider the political context and inherent power relationships within moral theories such as ethic of care. In ethic of care, a person must approach the caring relationship from the standpoint of the person needing care and understand their perspective to learn what they need out of the relationship.

Tronto (1993) defined caring as an ongoing process in which the person caring bases their actions on the concerns and needs expressed by the person needing care. Like prior researchers, Tronto identified four phases of care: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care receiving. All four phases are necessary to the practice of care, but the last two are vital to ensure care needs are met. The person cared for must express that they received care before a determination of adequate care can be made. In the development of ethic of care, Tronto described four ethical elements of care:

- attentiveness: a recognition that there is a need to be met
- responsibility: the factors in a relationship that require a person to care
- competence: the ability and skill to adequately provide care
- responsiveness: an awareness of the vulnerability inherent in unequal caring relationships and a commitment to consider others' needs as they have expressed them (rather than how the person caring perceives them)

Integrating the four phases of care with the four ethical elements of care is required to provide good care. Attentiveness is the ethical element aligned with the first phase of care: caring about. In the second phase (taking care of), the element of responsibility is crucial to taking steps to start the caring interaction. Competence is required to engage in caregiving, the third phase of care. Finally, care receiving is guided by the element of responsiveness by the person caring. Care as a practice must not privilege the person caring by allowing them to define needs in a way that suits them, which Tronto called privileged irresponsibility. By integrating attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness in the practice of care, the person caring may provide proper care.

Sevenhuijsen (2018) added insight to the first element of attention by explaining the dual roles of attention to self and others. Without first paying attention to oneself and engaging in critical self-reflection about caring interactions with others, a caregiver will not be able to pay adequate attention to the needs of the people under their care.

Engagement in this level of attention to self requires a person to slow down and set aside personal assumptions, mental images, and preoccupations to see the reality of the situation and the potential within the other person. Sevenhuijsen emphasized caring for

oneself, staying aware of one's own needs, and seeking to heal one's inner wounds as necessary steps to consciously care for others.

Outside of education, ethic of care has been applied to examine more responsible business communications (Karr, 2021), computational thinking and technology ethics (Silvis et al., 2022), the tourism industry (Boluk & Panse, 2022), and hospital services (Ballentine et al., 2023; Salminen-Karlsson & Golay, 2022). In education research, scholars have used ethic of care to explore intersectional stigma and faculty efforts to support community college students' rates of persistence (Brower et al., 2021), race-conscious care ethics in school leadership (Gunzenhauser et al., 2021), supporting LGBTQ students in secondary schools (Hornbeck & Duncheon, 2022), academic advising and sense of belonging in higher education (de Klerk, 2022), and the pedagogical grounding of ethnic studies teachers (Sosa-Provencio et al., 2021).

I chose to frame my study using ethic of care because of the disconnect I witnessed between teachers' efforts to relate to and care for their students and students' experiences of feeling excluded and uncared for in school, particularly at the secondary level. I wanted to use the framework to help me explore how ethic of care can be used to understand efforts to promote belongingness. The four phases of care and their corresponding ethical elements guided the study through the development of the research questions, data collection tools, and data analysis process.

The logical connections between the framework presented and the nature of my study included an understanding of how caring happens as a moral consideration in promoting belongingness for marginalized students and the need to examine how

teachers understand, define, and measure caring practices that result in the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. The elements of ethic of care include the need to make moral decisions through the perspectives of context and relationships, with an emphasis on compassion; additionally, those who are marginalized should be given extra consideration in the caring relationship through culturally responsive practices (Tronto, 2010). Grounding the current study in this conceptual framework made it possible to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Promoting Belongingness for Marginalized Students

Previous researchers approached the concept of belongingness by examining survey data about students' experiences with belonging and exploring students' perspectives about ways teachers create belongingness. Few researchers have explored teachers' perspectives about belongingness at school. The researchers who studied teachers' perspectives looked only at strategies teachers used to promote belongingness or strengthen relationships with all students without isolating the experiences of marginalized students (Booker, 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019).

Quantitative researchers have studied the relationship between multiple variables and students' sense of belonging as reported by students in survey data (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Aziz et al., 2024; Fenaughty et al., 2019; Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hatchel et al., 2019; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Montoro et al., 2021; Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Renick & Reich, 2021; Slaten et al., 2019; Veldin & Kozina, 2022). A strength of this approach is that researchers can access thousands of data points through

national surveys. Findings can be generalized to a broad population, and demographic subgroups can be compared. However, a weakness inherent in a quantitative approach is the inability to uncover how students understand and define a sense of belonging. Survey data lack the nuance in students' various experiences of belonging at school and the meaning they assign to those experiences that might be better accessed using qualitative methods.

Qualitative researchers have focused on uncovering students' perspectives about what makes them feel a sense of belonging at school (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Bettencourt, 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Keyes, 2019; Rodriguez, 2020; Sonu & Bellino, 2020). A strength of this approach is students can give context to their perspectives and assign meaning to their experiences of belonging or not belonging at school. Through a qualitative design, researchers hear directly from students about how they understand and interpret belongingness. A weakness in using student perspective data is that students have minimal control over what happens to them at school and can do little to change the environment when they lack a sense of belonging. The few existing studies that explored teachers' perspectives looked at how teachers implemented strategies to create a sense of belonging for students (Booker, 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). A strength of this approach is the findings may add to the practices teachers use to promote belongingness. A weakness in using teacher perspective data is that it would be unclear whether teachers' attempts to promote belongingness were successful, and there would be no exploration of how belongingness was promoted for marginalized students who reported lower levels of belongingness in secondary school.

Four categories emerged in my review of the literature about promoting belongingness for marginalized students: belongingness and marginalized students, promoting belongingness, care and relationship at school, and inclusive teaching practices. Even though research from the quantitative and qualitative literature about belongingness and marginalized students demonstrated the importance of belongingness at school, highlighted a difference in the experience of belongingness between marginalized and nonmarginalized students, described strategies for promoting belongingness, and explored marginalized students' perspectives about belongingness, gaps in the literature existed regarding secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Belongingness and Marginalized Students

The need to belong is fundamental to human growth and development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943). In schools, belonging has been described both as a student's sense of being liked, respected, and valued by their peers and teachers (Goodenow, 1993) and as a feeling of being an integral part of the community (Osterman, 2000). Students with a strong sense of belonging at school experienced higher levels of well-being and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2024; Grover et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Researchers have found that belongingness promoted higher future aspirations (Wong et al., 2019); increased academic resilience (Bostwick et al., 2022); improved civic engagement (Encina & Berger, 2021); influenced self-regulated learning self-efficacy (Slaten et al., 2019); and mitigated academic achievement gaps for ethnic minority students, immigrant students, and students with low

socioeconomic status (Ordaz & Mosqueda, 2021). In contrast, belonging uncertainty has been correlated with mental and physical health problems, emotional disconnection, maladaptive behaviors, and underachievement at school (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Goodenow, 1993; Healy, 2020). Marginalized students were particularly vulnerable to these adverse outcomes when their sense of belonging was threatened or challenged (Allen, 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Although the literature showed the importance of belonging to student well-being and academic achievement, students with marginalized identities often reported experiencing less belonging than their peers, both in K-12 schools (Graham et al., 2022; OECD, 2019; Whitehouse et al., 2021) and at four-year universities (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hussain & Jones, 2021). Students of color, students living in poverty, and students who identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community reported feeling less connected at school and did not see school as a place of community (Grover et al., 2021). A lower sense of belonging among marginalized students was exacerbated when marginalized students also perceived they were in the numerical minority at school (Graham et al., 2022; Kogachi & Graham, 2020).

In studies of high school students, researchers found that racially and ethnically marginalized students who reported experiencing unequal treatment and racial discrimination from teachers felt a lower sense of school belonging (Montoro et al., 2021; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). In a quantitative study, 1,444 high school students in central New York completed a questionnaire about school disciplinary practices and their perceptions of school climate (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). The researchers found that Black

students perceived significantly more negative differential treatment from their teachers, which was correlated with more negative school experiences. Pena-Shaff et al.'s findings were corroborated by Montoro et al. (2021), who examined the relationship between racial discrimination and school belonging. In an analysis of 1,686 high school students' survey responses, Montoro et al. found that Black, Latinx, and Asian American students who experienced discrimination from adults at school also reported a lower sense of school belonging; the negative relationship between adult discrimination and school belonging was most significant for Black students. In comparison, Rambaran et al. (2022) found that feelings of school belonging for students of color were higher when those students had strong relationships in groups with friends who shared the same ethnicity with the student.

In another study, Rodriguez (2020) conducted an ethnography with 19 Latinx youth at a Chicago high school to understand their experiences with school belongingness. Through observations, interviews, and artifact collection, Rodriguez found that Latinx students felt excluded and erased from the curriculum, culture, and community at school. The Latinx students relied on each other to build spaces of belonging. Other researchers found that transgender and sexual minority students were bullied more at school; received less support from their peers, teachers, and caregivers; and reported lower school belonging than their heterosexual, cisgender classmates (Fenaughty et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2019; Ullman, 2022).

In studies of adults, researchers found a correlation between experiences of discrimination at school and lower belongingness at the individual and school levels

(Baysu et al., 2023). In a narrative study, four undergraduates of color were asked to recall their childhood experiences of belonging and exclusion; the undergraduates shared stories of being bullied, feeling like outcasts, experiencing linguistic and racial discrimination, being denied access to advanced coursework, struggling to make friends, navigating conflict with teachers, lacking support from counselors, and dealing with food insecurity (Sonu & Bellino, 2020). Other researchers found that students of color and working-class students felt disconnected from the student culture at their universities and experienced discrimination, bias, tokenization, and a devaluing of their contributions (Bettencourt, 2021; Hussain & Jones, 2021). Students with multiple marginalized identities faced additional barriers to belonging, and researchers may need to explore marginalized students' experiences using an intersectional lens (Bettencourt, 2021).

Promoting Belongingness

The path to belongingness is not the same for everyone, and students may develop a strong sense of belonging for different reasons. Researchers proposed four pathways to belongingness: a communal-relationship path (having close bonds with other people), a general-appraisal path (receiving admiration from others), a group-membership path (being a member of a group), and a minor-sociability path (having small positive interactions with others) (Hirsch & Clark, 2019). Scholars recognized that belongingness was dynamic and emerged from four interrelated components: competencies for belonging, opportunities to belong, motivations to belong, and perceptions of belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Educators may use the four interrelated components of belonging as a framework to develop strategies to increase students' sense of belonging. Teachers play

an essential role in students' experiences of belonging at school (Grover et al., 2021), and they establish classroom climates using instructional practices that build relationships with students (Booker, 2021).

Some researchers examined secondary students' perspectives about factors that contribute to school belongingness. In a qualitative, grounded theory study to explore how teenagers experienced belonging at school, Keyes (2019) found that 31 racially and ethnically diverse high school students felt an increased sense of belonging when their teachers fostered meaningful, trusting relationships based on genuine care and respect. Other researchers conducted a qualitative study of middle school students and found that interpersonal relationships played a significant role in determining students' sense of belonging; middle school students who indicated few positive relationships with staff also reported a lower sense of school belonging (Renick & Reich, 2021). Researchers in another study of middle school students found that students who loved lunchtime consistently reported higher levels of school belonging (Whiting et al., 2022). Ullman (2022) found a positive correlational relationship between students' sense of belonging and their belief that teachers cared about them in a quantitative study of transgender and gender diverse high school students in Australia. Dearth-Wesley et al. (2023) examined the PISA survey responses of over 400,000 high school students in 62 countries, and found a positive association between teacher connection and school belonging. Adolescents identified a sense of fairness, relationships with teachers, and peer support as factors that contributed to their sense of belonging at school (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

The literature included some research about how teachers promote a sense of belongingness at school. Teachers may contribute to their students' sense of belonging by nurturing positive relationships, providing academic and emotional support, reminding students they are valued, and contributing to a safe and supportive school culture (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Booker (2021) conducted a qualitative study to understand how nine high school teachers created learning environments that promoted student belongingness. Booker found that teachers needed to be caring, consistent, and collaborative with students to promote belongingness. University staff who consistently used identity safety cues (ISCs) to communicate that diverse identities were valued and respected found an improved sense of belonging for marginalized students (Howansky et al., 2022). Some of the ISCs used in the study included a posted nondiscrimination policy, an introduction of the instructor's pronouns, a safe space image on the syllabus, a statement from the instructor about a commitment to inclusion, and representations of diverse identities in course lectures during the semester. Students in the class with an instructor who used ISCs reported a higher sense of belonging and better attendance at the end of the semester than students in the control class.

Strategies exist to help teachers understand how to promote belongingness, but barriers may prevent students from experiencing a strong sense of belonging. Booker (2021) found that even when secondary teachers knew strategies to create a sense of belonging, understood the need to consistently demonstrate care for students, and made space for student voices in classroom management, teachers still faced barriers to promoting belongingness because of social media influences and student mental health

concerns. Students in foster care struggled with belonging when frequent placement changes forced them to move between multiple schools in a single year (Johnson et al., 2020). Other reasons marginalized students may struggle to feel a sense of belonging included microaggressions, stereotype threat, or social identity threat (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021; Ullman, 2022). Psychological barriers like stereotype threat and social identity threat led students to feel alienated and uncomfortable at school, which contributed to their lack of belongingness (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021). In another study, scholars found that Black students were more vulnerable to belonging uncertainty when Black students viewed interracial interactions and disciplinary decisions through a racialized lens, questioned the relevance of the learning to their values and goals, and lacked opportunities to develop a critical consciousness (Gray et al., 2020).

Care and Relationship at School

It is essential to adolescents' psychological development that students have relationships with competent, caring adults that are reciprocal, attuned, culturally responsive, trustful, and positive (Osher et al., 2020). When such developmental relationships exist between adults and students, students are more secure in their learning, development, and psychological well-being (Osher et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2020). In a quantitative study, researchers surveyed 534 middle school students in the Midwest United States to understand the association between student–teacher developmental relationships and students' academic motivation, engagement, and performance as measured by sense of belonging, school climate, and grade point average (GPA) (Scales et al., 2020). Scales et al. found a positive correlation between student–teacher

developmental relationships and students' perceptions of belonging, school climate, academic motivation, and GPA. The researchers also discovered that lower-income students reported declining relationships with teachers and lower perceptions of belonging from the beginning to the end of the school year. The findings underscored the value of positive developmental relationships with caring adults to establish and promote a sense of belonging for students.

However, care is not only enacted and experienced directly through dyadic relationships. Organizational and contextual dimensions of caring and student engagement may also contribute to students' perceptions of belonging (Walls et al., 2021). For example, researchers found that in schools where teachers were given more time for collaboration, they were better able to maintain a caring school community in support of students' sense of belonging and engagement. Students' sense of belonging, engagement, and perceptions of care depended on students' experiences with adults and peers in the classroom, during unstructured time, and in past school experiences. Researchers found that students of different abilities, cultures, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses understood and perceived care differently (Wentzel, 2022). Caring is multidimensional and can contribute to students' sense of belonging at school, so teachers must codesign their care with students instead of imposing teachers' ideas of care onto students (Garcia et al., 2021).

Positive student–teacher relationships were consistently associated with care and belonging in studies about students' perspectives of care at school (Bass, 2019; Brooms, 2019; Brooms & Wint, 2021; Demerath et al., 2022; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020;

Whitehead et al., 2021). Bass (2019) asked 52 racially diverse high school students to describe their experiences with teachers' caring and found that relationships mattered most to students. Most of the students in Bass's study explained that teachers showed care by valuing students' individuality; providing extra academic support; offering high-quality, engaging instruction; and treating all students fairly. Students expressed a clear desire for caring, nurturing relationships with their teachers. High school students in another study explained trust that sustained a positive teacher–student relationship was built when students knew teachers liked students, knew teachers' motivations for teaching, heard teachers express compassionate understanding toward students, felt respected and unjudged by teachers, saw teachers exhibit racial and class awareness, considered teachers to be capable educators, and felt teachers' commitment to investing in students' success (Demerath et al., 2022).

Researchers who studied the caring experiences of Black boys in secondary school found that positive student–teacher relationships were vital to students' academic success (Brooms, 2019; Brooms & Wint, 2021). Brooms (2019) interviewed 20 Black men who graduated from an all-boys charter school in the United States to uncover how graduates ascribed their successful matriculation through high school. Participants described a sense of pride and belonging instilled through the school culture and strong “tough love” relationships teachers built with students (p. 819). A sense of belonging was critical to students' self-efficacy and academic success. Participants described teacher caring as building relationships, being willing to help students, holding high expectations, having strong interpersonal communication skills, and spending time with students. Black

high school boys also named tangible and intangible forms of care from teachers, including material resources, time, and close personal relationships (Brooms & Wint, 2021). Students consistently identified the important role of student–teacher relationships in describing experiences of care and belonging.

In contrast, students who do not experience teacher care have a lower sense of school belonging. In a case study of an all-female high school in the United Arab Emirates, some students expressed that teachers did not care about students or learning (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). Students perceived teachers as being harsh, uncaring, and cynical, even when teachers described instructional approaches as. Teachers’ use of sarcasm was specifically identified as an indicator of a lack of care and respect. Students shared a belief that teachers were trying their best, but thought teachers fell short of developing supportive, caring relationships with students because of institutional pressures to meet certain academic benchmarks. The negative student–teacher relationships contributed to a lower sense of belonging for students. It may be similarly true that teachers in the United States feel pressure to meet certain academic and standardized testing goals, which could interfere with efforts to cultivate positive relationships with students. Walls (2022) found that federal accountability expectations for teachers created tension with efforts to develop caring relationships with students.

Researchers also explored teachers’ perspectives about care and relationship at school (Cohen, 2023; Conroy & Ehrensall, 2021; Dávila & Linares, 2020; Demerath et al., 2022; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021; Walls, 2022). Educational leaders prioritized an ethic of care in their practice did so by embracing authenticity, relationships, and value-

driven decision making (Conroy & Ehrensall, 2021). Dávila and Linares (2020) found that secondary teachers conceptualized care through two important approaches: empathy and trust. Teachers engaged in pedagogical reflexivity to gain a deep understanding of linguistically diverse students' backgrounds and experiences in ways that created strong, supportive relationships. Learning about students' identities required time, patience, and flexibility, but doing so helped teachers create more safe and welcoming classrooms. In another study, high school educators explained that building trusting relationships with students required that teachers avoid unnecessary judgment and criticism, explain reasons and motivations for decisions, connect to students' lives through culturally responsive teaching, and provide a safe space for students from minoritized groups (Demerath et al., 2022). Walls (2022) found that middle school teachers who were best able to develop stable, caring relationships with students did so by attending to students' emotions, authentically affirming students' identities, helping students become more self-aware, and taking a long-term view of students' growth. Teachers learned enough about students through caring relationships to respond to students' immediate and persistent needs rather than focusing on more performative pressures. Performative pressure was especially acute for teachers who worked with marginalized students.

In a study about caring at school, McKinney de Royston et al. (2021) explored Black teachers' perspectives about teachers' role in protecting Black students. The researchers found that providing care for Black students required that teachers be racially and socio-politically conscious of the internal and external factors affecting students' experiences at school. When teachers ignored the sociopolitical realities of marginalized

students, caring practices perpetuated inequities and experiences of othering in the classroom (Cohen, 2023). In a qualitative study of teachers' caring practices in a Jordanian refugee school, Cohen found that even when teachers focused on building personal relationships with students, attending to the whole child, and employing a student-centered approach, teachers' care efforts were limited by difference-blindness, silence about refugees' lived experiences, and prejudiced attitudes. Efforts to build caring relationships were stymied by teachers' lack of attention to the sociopolitical contexts of immigrant and refugee students. Therefore, it may be necessary for secondary teachers seeking to promote belongingness to pay specific attention to the sociopolitical context of marginalized students.

Inclusive Teaching Practices

The role of inclusive, culturally responsive teaching practices in promoting belongingness and enacting care for marginalized students should not be ignored (Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). Strong relationships with marginalized students were supported by enacting equity-minded, culturally responsive teaching practices (Andrews et al., 2019). Researchers found that Black and Latino boys formed close, positive relationships with teachers and peers in high school when teachers intentionally enacted culturally relevant programming (Conlin & Villavicencio, 2023). Secondary students reported that in identity affirming, humanizing environments, students felt welcomed, included, and had an increased sense of belonging (Adamian, 2022; Conlin & Villavicencio, 2023). Using inclusive, equity-oriented teaching practices like culturally

relevant pedagogy may support teachers seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students.

Culturally responsive teaching is an equity-minded practice that reduces achievement gaps, promotes a more equitable education for students, and cultivates a sense of belonging in their students (Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Min et al., 2021). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) was first introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995) as a direct response to deficit approaches to teaching and learning that sought to eradicate linguistic, literate, and cultural differences in favor of assimilation with the dominant White American culture (Paris, 2012). The term CRP describes teacher practices that support academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness in African American and other marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The theory was expanded on by Paris (2012), who offered culturally sustaining pedagogy as an evolution of CRP that could be enacted to maintain and perpetuate linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism in schools. Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires an acknowledgment and valuing of both the traditional and evolving ways people experience culture; therefore, its practitioners seek to center and normalize the cultures and perspectives of traditionally marginalized students such that students become the subject instead of the object of instructional practice (Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017). Furthermore, authentic caring, which fosters reciprocal teacher–student relationships, embodies CRP practices of validating and responding to students’ diverse cultural backgrounds and values (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

Researchers have explored how teachers engage in inclusive, equity-minded, culturally responsive practices by examining factors supportive of implementation (Abreu et al., 2019; Min et al., 2021; Woodcock et al., 2022). In a qualitative grounded theory study, Min et al. (2021) interviewed 16 high school teachers to understand the role of teacher agency in enabling them to enact culturally responsive teaching practices. The authors found that having diverse students, ample opportunities for professional learning, personal experiences with marginalization, and a social justice-oriented teaching philosophy contributed to an interest in culturally responsive teaching, while collaboration, administrative support, observations of positive outcomes, and student agency led to stronger positive teacher agency toward enacting culturally responsive teaching. Research at the university level yielded similar findings. In a qualitative study, Abreu et al. (2019) surveyed and interviewed five professors at a racially and ethnically diverse university to understand how the instructors enacted culturally sustaining pedagogy after participating in a professional development workshop. The researchers found that the professors' disciplinary identities, lived experiences, and self-efficacy affected their ability to engage in culturally sustaining practices. In another study, Woodcock et al. (2022) interviewed and surveyed 41 elementary school teachers to understand inclusive education and identify strategies to promote inclusion based on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. The researchers found that even with a similar understanding of inclusive education, highly efficacious teachers were more effective than low efficacious teachers in creating welcoming, safe, respectful, and accepting classrooms.

Researchers have also explored and identified challenges to enacting inclusive teaching practices (Min et al., 2021; Zhu, 2023). In a narrative inquiry about enacting care-based, culturally responsive teaching, one teacher acknowledged the challenges posed by the restrictions of a dense curriculum and standardized testing requirements (Zhu, 2023). Researchers also found that pushback from others and lack of time, cultural competence, and knowledge and skill with culturally responsive teaching led to weaker positive teacher agency in enacting culturally responsive practices (Min et al., 2021). Even when teachers want to enact inclusive practices, they may experience challenges that make it difficult for them to implement.

Methodology in Belongingness Research

The research literature is primarily comprised of quantitative studies, though qualitative studies are becoming more common. It is important to explore the perception data that can be collected through qualitative methods to begin understanding why marginalized students experience less belonging than their nonmarginalized peers. In the current literature, there are very scant qualitative studies eliciting the views of teachers who are charged with promoting belongingness. Therefore, I used a qualitative design for my study to fill the gap in the literature.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I described the conceptual framework for my study and reviewed the literature on the key concepts related to promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I identified four themes in the literature review: belongingness and marginalized students, promoting belongingness, care and relationship at school, and inclusive

teaching practices. The existing body of literature showed that belongingness is necessary for all students, but marginalized students experience lower levels of belongingness at school than their nonmarginalized peers. Even though researchers have studied the ways in which teachers promote belongingness, a gap between the experiences of marginalized and nonmarginalized students persists. Studies are beginning to make connections between care, relationships, and a sense of belonging at school, which are important elements of inclusive teaching practices. The quantitative and qualitative literature about belongingness and marginalized students demonstrated the importance of belongingness at school, highlighted a difference in the experience of belongingness between marginalized and nonmarginalized students, described strategies for promoting belongingness, and explored perspectives about belongingness from marginalized students. Nevertheless, a gap in the literature existed for secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In Chapter 3, I describe how I planned to fill the gap in the literature and explain my rationale for the qualitative methodology I used in this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In this chapter, I present the research design and methodology I used to conduct my study and my rationale for choosing the methodology. I explain the role of the researcher; participant selection logic; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and data analysis plan. Finally, I discuss my plan to achieve trustworthiness and maintain ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

I sought to explore one research question in this study: What enables secondary teachers to promote belongingness for marginalized students? The research question was supported by three research subquestions: (a) What are the strategies that secondary teachers use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (b) What are secondary teachers' perspectives about the strategies they use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (c) What barriers do secondary teachers identify in seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students? The phenomenon of interest in this study was the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. I wanted to explore how secondary teachers interpreted their experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students and the meaning they attributed to those experiences so I could interpret those meanings for my study.

I used a basic qualitative design as described by Merriam and Grenier (2019). Unlike quantitative research, which examines the relationship between two or more

variables, qualitative research was aligned with my constructivist paradigm, the premise that perception is reality (Burkholder et al., 2016). Constructivists understand learning about people's perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of their experiences is essential to understanding a phenomenon (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

My phenomenon of interest, the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students, was best approached through a basic qualitative design because I sought to interpret and understand the perspectives of secondary teachers who work with marginalized students about the topic of belongingness. I wanted to learn how the teachers in my study perceived the promotion of belongingness in their contexts. A quantitative study would not have enabled me to answer the research question because quantitative research is deductive and measures relationships between variables, not perspectives (see Burkholder et al., 2016). Other qualitative designs would have been inappropriate to answer the research question because other designs have additional dimensions, beyond interpreting the meaning of the phenomenon, that went beyond the scope of my research. For example, the unit of study in an ethnographic study or a case study should be a bounded system or cultural group (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). I wanted to explore teachers' perspectives more broadly, beyond a culture or system bounded by location or time. Narrative research would not have been appropriate because narrative research is used by researchers to understand perspectives and experiences individually rather than collectively (see Burkholder et al., 2016). A phenomenological or grounded theory study may have been appropriate, but as a new researcher, I wanted to keep my research design as straightforward as possible. A basic qualitative design was the best

option for a beginner researcher like me who wanted to understand the meaning of a phenomenon for the people involved (see Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher in this study, I was the primary instrument in data collection. As the primary instrument in data collection, I needed to strategically consider my role in the study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My interactions with the participants during the interview process and the questions I asked had the potential to influence the results if I had not taken intentional measures to monitor my role and mitigate bias through reflexivity. In my study, the participants were secondary teachers who work with marginalized students. I was formerly a secondary teacher who worked mostly with marginalized students, so I needed to be aware of and address any of my thoughts about promoting belongingness for marginalized students when I asked questions and analyzed the data I collected in response to those questions. I am also the Virginia Teacher of the Year and a member of the National Network of State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY). Due to my membership in NNSTOY, I might have known some of my participants professionally, but no power hierarchies exist among NNSTOY members. Even though I once taught marginalized students and might have known some participants professionally, I incorporated reflexivity to manage my role as the primary instrument of research using a reflection journal during the process of data collection and analysis (see Creswell & Miller, 2000; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

In addition to monitoring my role as the researcher, I ensured any incentives I provided my participants aligned with ethical standards and did not influence their

responses. Reciprocity, the offering of gifts or favors in exchange for sharing perspectives, is one form of incentive that can create positive experiences for researchers and their participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I planned to offer a \$50 Amazon gift card to participants who completed an interview with me. I recruited participants from an elite pool of teachers who may already have many demands on their time. The gift card was meant to show my appreciation for the time each participant took to share their perspectives with me and provided some compensation for their time. To avoid undue influence on participants, I provided the gift cards in a separate email after the conclusion of the interview. The gift cards did not include any conditions or expectations of additional labor.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

In this basic qualitative study, the population of participants was secondary teachers in the United States who work with marginalized students. Probability sampling was not feasible for the current study because participants needed to be teachers who could honestly reflect on experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students, even when asked to think about and share examples of unsuccessful attempts to promote belongingness. Purposive sampling was the most appropriate sampling strategy; in purposive sampling, the researcher can select participants based on who is judged to be most useful to the purpose of the study (Babbie, 2017). A researcher seeking to replicate the current study should be purposeful in selecting participants who demonstrate the ability to self-reflect on skills and identities and who value equity, inclusion, cultural

responsiveness, or belongingness for marginalized students. The participants should confirm eligibility based on the criteria for inclusion. If initial recruitment attempts result in too few participants, the researcher may rely on snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a technique in which participants recommend other people for participation in a study (Babbie, 2017).

The proposed sample size for the current study was 10–12 participants. The recommendation was smaller than some researchers suggest for qualitative studies (Baker & Edwards, 2012). However, the use of nonprobabilistic and purposive sampling based on a few predetermined criteria justifies a smaller sample size (Guest et al., 2006). In the current study, participants were selected based on predetermined criteria: participants were secondary teachers who had a demonstrated ability to self-reflect on their skills and identities as teachers and who explicitly value equity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, or belongingness for marginalized students. Potential participants were contacted via social media postings with a description of the study and criteria for participation. Potential participants were required to confirm they met the criteria for participation before scheduling an interview.

One factor to consider when determining the appropriate sample size for a study is data saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Data saturation is the point at which no new meaningful or helpful answers are given by interviewees (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2015). In qualitative research, the sample size needed to reach saturation can be impossible to predict before conducting the study (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Therefore, a wide range of sample sizes is considered acceptable in qualitative

research. The appropriate number of interviews depends on many factors including the research purpose, the heterogeneity of the population, the complexity of the topic or questions, and the point at which data saturation and theoretical saturation are reached (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Guest et al., 2006). In a study to explore data saturation and variability, Guest et al. (2006) found that data saturation occurred after 12 interviews. Additionally, researchers who study an elite population may find that smaller numbers of participants are needed to uncover adequate and valuable information (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Therefore, 10–12 interviewees would be considered an appropriate sample size for the current study.

Instrumentation

The sole data collection instrument for this study was individual interviews. Individual interviews are relational, person centered, and subjective, which allow for data collection that can result in contextualized descriptions of teachers' perceptions and experiences, integrated perspectives from multiple participants, and holistic understandings of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Observational data collection is another method used in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). However, observational data collection would not have worked for the current study because I would not have been able to gather observational data about the teachers' points of view. Observational data could be interpreted only through my perspective. Focus groups might have been another appropriate option for data collection; however, focus groups can sometimes result in groupthink and is best suited for research in which the goal is to understand concepts related to social interaction within a particular context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Therefore, individual interviews were the best method to collect data for the research question because I sought the perspectives of my participants.

I used an interview guide (see Appendix A) that included the interview protocol and questions for my data collection instrument. The interview protocol included the script I used to welcome participants, give them an overview of the study, review the parameters of their participation and their informed consent, and remind them they were free to stop their participation in the study at any time without repercussions. The introductory script also included the definitions of marginalization and belonging I used for this study. I developed the interview questions using my conceptual framework and guidance from experts about how to write open-ended questions that can generate in-depth, rich, and meaningful data (see Jacob & Furgerson, 2015; Patton, 2015; Turner, 2010). I designed a semistructured interview protocol because this method gives the researcher flexibility to remain open to new questions or insights that emerge during the interview (see Morris, 2015). The interview questions were informed by the four ethical elements of care:

- **Attentiveness:** To recognize a need that must be met (belonging), the person caring should have a clear understanding of what belongingness means for marginalized students.
- **Responsibility:** The person caring should be able to recognize a responsibility to care for the belonging needs of marginalized students.
- **Competence:** The person caring should be able to identify the abilities and skills needed to promote belongingness adequately.

- Responsiveness: The person caring should be able to articulate an awareness of the vulnerabilities inherent in unequal caring relationships, describe how to consider marginalized students' needs, and identify how to seek feedback from marginalized students about experiences with belongingness (Tronto, 1993).

A major principle of my conceptual framework, ethic of care, was that care is defined by the one being cared for (Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993). I included questions that invited participants to reflect on and share the ways in which they engage with marginalized students to learn whether their attempts to promote belongingness are effective. I aligned the interview guide with the research questions to ensure the sufficiency of my data collection instrument to answer the research questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I planned to conduct individual interviews with 10–12 secondary teachers who met the criteria for inclusion. I intended to recruit participants from an elite pool of secondary teachers, including National and State Teachers of the Year (NNSTOY) and National Board-Certified Teachers (NBCT), because members had gone through a rigorous application process that required an ability to critically self-reflect on teacher practices, skills, and identities. The application and vetting process for teachers who receive NNSTOY or NBCT recognition increased my confidence that participants would be well-suited to share perspectives that may require vulnerability and reflective insight about practices.

The best sources for finding participants who fit my criteria for inclusion in the sample were teacher organizations and social media groups. To begin recruiting participants for the interviews, I developed an email announcement that could be sent to teachers who were State Teachers of the Year or NBCTs. It is not uncommon for teacher organizations to email recruitment requests for doctoral studies. If needed, I planned to seek permission from the communication directors at two different teacher organizations to support me in recruiting participants by asking permission to send an email announcement to members. If I had been unable to send an announcement through the teacher organizations, I planned to use public online directories to email potential participants who fit the criteria for inclusion.

I also wrote a social media post to promote my study on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and other relevant social media platforms. Interested candidates were asked to complete a short interest form, linked in both the email and the social media post, to indicate interest, confirm the criteria for participation, and share an email address with me. Once I received responses via the interest form, I planned to confirm interested participants met the criteria for inclusion by reviewing the form answers and verifying that interested candidates self-identified as eligible. Then, I planned to send an email to each interested participant, using the email address submitted on the interest form, to obtain informed consent. Potential participants were instructed to respond to the informed consent email with the words “I consent.” Receipt of informed consent allowed me to proceed with scheduling time for an individual interview with each participant. I planned

to give my participants multiple opportunities before and during the interviews to refuse to participate or stop their participation in the study.

Once potential participants provided informed consent, I planned to use Calendly to find a mutually agreeable time to meet over Zoom for the interview. Zoom is an online video and audio-conferencing tool that allows participants to see each other in real time from anywhere in the world. There are several advantages to engaging in face-to-face interviews via Zoom. There is no time delay between questions and answers, participants can rely on social cues such as intonation and body language, the conversation is interactive (which builds trust and rapport), the audio component of the interviews can be easily recorded, and the virtual platform can remove the challenges of geography when interviewing participants from around the country (Opdenakker, 2006).

To make the interview process go smoothly, I scheduled the interview sessions for longer than I thought I needed for the interview. Each interview was scheduled for 75 minutes even though I anticipated each interview lasting only 60 minutes. By scheduling longer interview blocks, I built in some buffer time at the beginning of the meeting to get comfortable, review the introductory script, and answer any questions my participants might have had without feeling rushed or running out of time before getting through all the questions.

I planned to use the recording feature in Zoom to record only the audio portion of the interviews and save the recordings as encrypted files on my laptop. After each interview, I planned to use the Otter.ai website to upload my audio recordings and transcribe my interviews. Participants' identities were masked in the recorded file and

interview transcriptions using anonymizing nomenclature (e.g., P1, P2 ... P12). If my participants mentioned any names of individuals, places, or regions in their interview, I planned to replace the identifying information with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

If my initial recruitment attempts resulted in too few participants, I planned to use snowball sampling to find additional participants for my study. However, every year new State Teachers of the Year are named in each state (The Council of Chief State School Officers, n.d.), and over 100,000 teachers across the United States have achieved NBCT status (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, n.d.-b), so I did not anticipate challenges in finding enough participants who met the criteria for my study. However, if I had experienced challenges with recruitment or my initial recruitment efforts resulted in too few participants to reach saturation, I would have used snowball sampling and asked those participants who completed interviews to recommend friends or colleagues who met the criteria for the study.

At the end of each interview, participants exited the study after I read a concluding script from the interview guide. I reiterated that participants could still stop their participation in the study if necessary. The week following each interview, I emailed a code participants could use to redeem a \$50 Amazon gift card as a thank you incentive. Within 4 weeks of each interview, I shared the transcription with each participant via email and asked for a review of accuracy. If I had any follow-up questions, I would ask up to three additional questions in the transcript review email. The possibility of asking up to three follow-up questions via email was explained as part of informed consent and

included in the information I shared at the conclusion of each interview. Once the study was completed, I planned to share the full report with all participants via email.

Data Analysis Plan

The value of qualitative data comes out during the process of data analysis, which turns the data into findings (Patton, 2015). While there is no clear prescription for qualitative data analysis, guidelines exist for different methodological approaches. For my basic qualitative study, I planned to use inductive, qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis enables the researcher to focus on finding meaning in the data related to the research question (Schreier, 2014). A qualitative content analysis approach is more flexible for the researcher and allows for categorization of related examples or experiences.

A qualitative researcher must analyze data to understand the phenomenon of interest (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). For much of its history, qualitative researchers have relied on verbatim transcriptions to record and analyze interview data. A verbatim transcription is an exact written record of a conversation and is the best method to get the researcher closer to the participants' experiences, words, and meanings (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). In the current study, I used verbatim transcriptions for data analysis.

First, I needed to develop a method to organize my data before I could begin making sense of it. I planned to copy my interview transcripts into Excel and organize the responses by research question. Each interview transcript was copied into an individual Excel sheet to keep the raw data unique and separate by respondent. Then, I read through the complete response to each question and broke the text into a new cell where I saw a

transition to a new idea or topic. After organizing the interviewee's responses by question and content, I began the process of open coding the data using an inductive process.

Qualitative researchers use inductive coding to remain open to learning what the data have to say (Saldaña, 2021). Coding in Excel would make it easy for me to update my codebook as I identified new codes in the data. As I tracked and organized my codes, I was sure to include analytic memos to explain the meaning I assigned to each code, as recommended by Saldaña.

I planned to engage in an iterative coding process of at least two to three rounds to ensure a deep understanding of the data. Saldaña (2021) identified seven methods of first-cycle coding that provide a first look at the data. During first-cycle coding, I used initial coding to break the data into discrete parts I could examine and compare. Initial coding was best for my data analysis process because it allowed me to remain open to all possibilities that might emerge from the data. I engaged in a second and third round of coding to describe the data by concepts. Concept coding is a coding method that allows the research to begin assigning meaning to the data by identifying the concepts described within (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout the process of first-cycle coding, I reflected using analytic memos. In the analytic memos, I reflected on and wrote about anything I found surprising, interesting, or troubling in the data; my code choices and their meanings; and the patterns, categories, or themes I saw emerging from the data.

During second-cycle coding, I planned to organize the first-cycle concept codes by frequency, use pattern coding to identify categories, and develop higher-level themes (see Saldaña, 2021). As I transitioned to second-cycle coding, I shifted to a more

deductive analysis. A shift to a deductive approach in the second round would allow me to apply the conceptual framework to the data analysis process (see Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). I planned to use the elements of ethic of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness) to map the first-cycle codes and use pattern coding to identify the patterns and themes in relation to the conceptual framework. If the data had included outliers that did not fit within the elements of ethic of care, I would have included them in my discussion of the findings.

Issues of Trustworthiness

As a newer field of methodology, qualitative researchers may face questions of trustworthiness (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). Generally, trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to how closely the findings represent the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In pursuit of a trustworthy study, qualitative researchers should consider credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004; Xerri, 2018). For each dimension of trustworthiness, I describe the strategies I planned to implement in my study.

Credibility

First, credibility means the researchers measured what they intended to measure and interpreted the data as it was meant by the participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). In the current study, I planned to give participants multiple opportunities before, during, and after the interviews to refuse or stop participating in the study. Providing multiple opportunities to leave the study meant I only interviewed teachers who were genuinely interested in sharing perspectives about the phenomenon of interest,

which Shenton (2004) explained can help ensure honesty from participants. I planned to invite scrutiny of my work from peers and my dissertation committee, engage in reflective journaling, and offer participants the opportunity to review the interview transcript for accuracy.

Transferability

Typically, qualitative studies are not intended to claim direct transferability to different contexts, so the extent to which findings may be transferable rests with the reader. Transferability refers to the notion that the findings can be applied to similar phenomena outside of the context of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). One consideration for improving transferability is to collect data from different settings (Shenton, 2004). Participants in the current study were secondary teachers from different parts of the country who taught different content areas. The diversity in participants' experiences and locations could contribute to the transferability of the findings. Another important way to achieve transferability is by using thick description and contextualizing the findings (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

Third, dependability refers to the consistency and stability of data over time and is achieved when the data help the researcher answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In the current study, I included a strong rationale for the methodology, ensured clear alignment across the study, maintained audit trails, and wrote detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis processes. These strategies improve the dependability of a research study (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability means the researcher has sought to mitigate the effects of subjectivity and bias to the point that another researcher may be able to corroborate the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Xerri, 2018). Qualitative researchers seeking to strengthen the confirmability of a study should engage in thorough and thoughtful reflexivity that challenges biases and presumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Shenton, 2004). I planned to remain reflexive during my study through reflective journaling and regular conversations with my chair. Additionally, an audit trail of the data analysis process can contribute to the confirmability of a study (Shenton, 2004; Xerri, 2018). The Excel file, tables, codebook, and analysis memos I created during the data analysis process would show my thinking as I coded, categorized, and themed my data to make the findings more confirmable.

Ethical Procedures

Participant confidentiality is an important ethical consideration when conducting qualitative interview research (Patton, 2015). Informed consent is one way to mitigate this ethical concern by ensuring the participant is aware of the nature, purpose, and use of interview responses for the study. I planned to collect informed consent and disguise the any identifying information with pseudonyms or anonymizing nomenclature (see Patton, 2015). Before conducting the interviews, I planned to share with participants assurances of how I would protect confidentiality throughout the study, as recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2021).

Every educational researcher must adhere to the Code of Ethics from the American Educational Research Association (2011). To ensure ethical procedures, I made sure not to begin my study until after I received approval to conduct research with human participants from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden. Once IRB approval was received (June 6, 2024, IRB approval number 06-06-24-1009996), I did not make any changes to the study. Next, to avoid ethical concerns with recruitment, I did not recruit interview participants from among my friend groups. Third, after receiving an interest form submission, I sent an informed consent email to each potential participant to explain the nature and purpose of the study, any potential risks to participants, assurances of confidentiality, and information about the interview process. Interested candidates provided informed consent by responding in the affirmative to the informed consent email. Finally, I ensured participants knew they could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion.

During the data collection and analysis processes, I ensured ethical procedures related to confidentiality: I masked participant identities and locations in transcriptions using pseudonyms or anonymizing nomenclature; stored all recordings and transcriptions on local, encrypted files on my laptop; and removed all identifying information, such as participant and school names and locations, from the final report. I did not conduct the study using any nonpersonal equipment and I ensured I had no influence or authority over the participants.

Summary

In the chapter, I presented the methodology I used to conduct the current study. I gave a rationale for choosing a basic qualitative study to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I included a discussion of the role of the researcher; participant selection logic; instrumentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; my data analysis plan; and the coding method. Finally, I discussed my plan to achieve trustworthiness and maintain ethical procedures. In Chapter 4, I present the data collection characteristics, data analysis procedures, and a summary of findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I explored one research question in this study: What enables secondary teachers to promote belongingness for marginalized students? The research question was supported by three research subquestions: (a) What are the strategies that secondary teachers use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (b) What are secondary teachers' perspectives about the strategies they use to promote belongingness for marginalized students? (c) What barriers do secondary teachers identify in seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students?

In this chapter, I report the results of my basic qualitative study. I describe the setting for the study and present the participant demographics and characteristics. I then describe the data collection and analysis process, explain how I incorporated my conceptual framework into data analysis, provide evidence of trustworthiness, and share the study results. I organize my findings by theme and present data samples to support each finding. Finally, I conclude with a chapter summary.

Setting

I conducted the interviews for this basic qualitative study using the online Zoom platform. After receiving Walden University IRB approval to conduct my research, I posted a researcher-developed and IRB-approved social media announcement on Instagram and Facebook. In the recruitment announcement, I explained the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and study guidelines, and gave a link to an interest form where

potential participants could confirm their eligibility and provide an email address. Once I received the interest form submissions, I sent each respondent an informed consent email to obtain electronic consent to participate in the study. After receiving informed consent, I shared a Calendly link that could be used to schedule a 75-minute block of time for the interview, as approved by the IRB. I conducted the interviews over Zoom from July 16, 2024, to September 10, 2024. In total, 11 teachers participated in the current study.

Demographics

The study sample consisted of 11 secondary teachers in the United States who were members of NNSTOY, NBCT, or both. Participants taught at middle or high schools across the country. Table 1 shows the participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade taught	Elite status	Gender
P1	9	NBCT	Man
P2	8	NBCT	Woman
P3	9–12	Both	Woman
P4	7	NBCT	Woman
P5	9–12	NBCT	Woman
P6	7–8	Both	Woman
P7	6	NBCT	Woman
P8	10–11	NNSTOY	Woman
P9	11–12	NNSTOY	Woman
P10	7–12	NBCT	Man
P11	9–12	NBCT	Woman

Note. NBCT = National Board Certified Teacher; NNSTOY = National Network of State

Teacher of the Year.

Data Collection

As the primary tool for data collection, I conducted one-time, individual, semistructured interviews with 11 secondary teachers who had received NNSTOY or NBCT (or both) recognition. Interested, eligible candidates used Calendly to choose a mutually agreeable time to meet on Zoom for 75 minutes. The first interview took place on June 14, 2024, and the 10th interview on July 16, 2024. The 11th participant experienced some weather and travel-related conflicts that required the interview to be rescheduled three times, which pushed the final interview back to September 10, 2024. Although I expected each interview to take between 60 and 75 minutes, interviews ranged from 23 to 105 minutes. The differences in interview length between participants was due to the brevity or depth of information provided by participants in the responses. I did not leave out any interview questions or limit any responses. Before I began each interview, I reviewed the parameters for participation, explained the voluntary nature of the study, and collected verbal consent to proceed with the interview. I closed out each interview by explaining what participants could expect next and expressing gratitude for the time and perspectives shared with me.

For each interview, I recorded only the audio portion of the conversation. I kept my video on for the duration of the interview, but participants had the choice to keep the camera off or turn it on, knowing that only the audio would be recorded. Only one participant chose to keep the camera off during the interview. After each interview ended, I uploaded the saved audio file from my computer to Kaltura, a transcription tool included in Walden University's Canvas platform. Originally, I planned to use the

Otter.ai website to help me produce verbatim transcriptions, but before I conducted my first interview, I received guidance from my chair and another member of the university faculty that students should use only Kaltura to protect the confidentiality of the data. After each audio file was processed by Kaltura, I copied the text of the draft transcript into a Microsoft Word file and reviewed the audio recording to ensure accuracy. During my review, I redacted any identifying information from the transcripts as I edited them. I created a total of 11 Word files, one for each participant. Both the audio files and verbatim transcriptions were securely stored on my personal computer in an encrypted file where they will remain secured for the next 5 years.

I followed the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 with one variation. Before beginning my research, I planned to recruit candidates using social media posts and emails sent from cooperating teacher organizations. However, I was able to secure 11 participants using only social media postings, so I did not need to ask any teacher organizations to send out an email on my behalf.

I experienced a rather unusual circumstance when I began data collection. Initially, I posted a recruitment announcement publicly on social media, which included Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Within 24 hours of posting the announcement online, I had over 400 submissions through the interest form. As I began reaching out via email with informed consent and interview scheduling requests, I discovered that most, if not all, of the interest form submissions were from individuals posing as teachers. I had a positive first interview and was excited to see that several more interviews were scheduled for the following week. However, my interactions with the next interviewee

raised some red flags for me, and the interested candidate was unable to confirm meeting the eligibility criteria for participation in the study. Because I could not confirm eligibility, I explained I would not be able to proceed with the interview and ended the call. This anomaly happened again with the next scheduled interviewee.

I then reached out via email to the remaining people with scheduled interviews to confirm eligibility for participation; none were able to identify themselves as real teachers. The next 50 interest form submissions similarly could not show themselves to be teachers when I emailed for eligibility confirmation. At that point, I discarded the list of submissions and reposted the recruitment announcement with a new interest form link. I posted the new announcement only on Instagram and in a private Facebook group. Over the next 3 weeks, I received 25 new responses. From those 25 submissions, I received informed consent from 15 interested candidates and was able to schedule 14 interviews. One scheduled candidate decided to withdraw from the study before the interview; two did not show up on Zoom at the time of the scheduled interviews and were unresponsive to my follow-up emails. In the end, I met with and interviewed 11 participants.

Data Analysis

To start the data analysis process, I organized each participant's interview responses in Excel to make meaning of the data. Each participant's interview responses were kept in individual Excel sheets to keep the raw data unique and separate by respondent. First, I copied my interview transcripts into Excel and organized the responses by research question. To ensure each unique idea was captured and analyzed separately, I split responses containing multiple distinct topics into individual cells.

After organizing each interviewee's responses by question and topic, I began the process of open coding the data using an inductive process. I chose to code inductively in the first cycle to remain open to uncovering the meaning in participants' responses. For first-cycle coding, I used initial coding to break the data into discrete parts and then applied concept coding to develop original codes that described the concepts emerging from the data. I kept my codebook on the first sheet of the Excel file and updated it as I identified new codes in the data. As I added codes, I wrote analytic memos to define and explain the meaning I assigned to each code. After the first two rounds of coding, I had over 80 codes, so I decided to combine codes with similar definitions. I completed a third round of concept coding using the modified list of 42 codes. Finally, I analyzed the codes for saturation and eliminated any codes that did not appear in at least seven participants' interviews. I chose seven as the saturation point to preserve the discrete nuances between participants' responses to the interview questions. Table 2 shows the final 23 codes that emerged from first-cycle coding, along with a definition of each.

Table 2*First-Cycle Codes*

Code	Definition
Care	Find joy in teaching, enjoy being around students, and want them to self-actualize
Communicate belonging	Be intentional about using inclusive language, interrupting hate or bias, and telling students they have worth
Community	Work together with the larger community and lean on the expertise and skill of others around you
Create psychological safety	Vulnerability to be authentic, take risks, make mistakes, apologize, and build trust
Educate	Teach students how to care for each other give them skills to build resilience and confidence
Fill the gaps	Willingness to identify what you still need to learn, seek out learning opportunities, and hear from people who are different from you
Flexibility	Have the patience and creativity to think outside the box, take the small wins, and invest the necessary time
Holistic	Have a larger understanding of the context to know how to meet kids' needs
Humanization	Exposure to diverse people and places leads to love and empathy for those who are different from you
Humility	Don't presume everything is personal or that you know best
Inclusive	Belief that every person deserves to feel a sense of belonging and that centering belonging practices is good for all students
Individualized	You need to know each kid's needs to individualize their experience
Intentionality	When planning, be intentional about creating belonging and centering the needs of marginalized students
Lack of knowledge	Not having the knowledge or skills to serve marginalized communities well
Make connections	Connect with students and families to know them on a personal level
Marigolds	Surround yourself with people who inspire, mentor, and challenge you while lifting you up and helping you grow
Normalization	Be intentional about including diverse perspectives and histories so everyone gets to see themselves and others as "just normal"
Pay attention	Observe kids' behaviors, ask them questions, and actively listen to their feedback
Personal history	Having your own experiences of belonging or not belonging
Purpose	The overall notion that creating belongingness is central to the job of teaching
Reflective	Thinking about and learning from experiences to improve future actions
Upbringing	Biases and discomfort stemming from culture, beliefs, or having very few experiences with marginalization and diversity
Warm demander	Holding high expectations for students while providing the scaffolds they need to access the curriculum and succeed

In second-cycle coding, I printed the final list of codes and cut the codes out to be physically sorted into categories. I first used pattern coding to sort codes into enablers and barriers. Two codes represented barriers identified by participants; the other 21 codes represented factors that enabled participants to promote belongingness for marginalized students. After sorting the codes into groups, I shifted from an inductive to a deductive analysis to apply the a priori concepts from my literature review and conceptual framework to the data. I used the topics from the literature review and the elements of ethic of care (attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness) to help name the categories I developed through pattern coding. Using the emergent categories, I identified three themes in the data: (a) Teacher practices that emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth (Theme 1); (b) a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practice (Theme 2); and (c) barriers emerged from teachers’ lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students (Theme 3). Table 3 shows the relationship between the themes, categories, and codes.

Table 3*Relationship Between Themes, Categories, and Codes*

Theme	Category	Code
Teacher practices that emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth	Educate, culturally responsive, build relationships, teaching philosophy, inner work	Educate, warm demander, normalization, make connections, holistic, communicate belonging, create psychological safety, community, flexibility, humility, intentionality, reflective
A caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices	Attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness	Humanization, care, personal history, inclusive, purpose, fill the gaps, marigolds, individualized, pay attention
Barriers emerged from teachers’ lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students	Lack of attentiveness, lack of competence	upbringing, lack of knowledge

Among the 11 interviews, I found no discrepant cases. However, there were some differences in how participants described their perspectives about enabling factors for promoting belongingness. For example, only P8 spoke about the need to focus on personal healing through therapy:

I think that I think you have asked about it, but I want to reiterate it, that there’s work that the individual teacher needs to do with their life experiences that will allow them to open up the possibility of tackling this work in a larger group. So, I want to give space for, like, therapy, learning about intergenerational trauma, the biology of trauma, epigenetics, the importance of our own physical and mental health.

Even though this perspective was unique in its mention of therapy, it fit within the definition of the humility code, which encompassed the understanding that personal growth is a process. Other participants' examples that fell within humility included not making assumptions about students, not taking feedback personally, and accepting personal fallibility. Any perspectives that were shared by six or fewer participants and did not fit within a defined code were discarded from my analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I gave each of the participants multiple opportunities before and during their interviews to withdraw from the study without consequence, to ensure credibility. I also assured participants they could refuse to answer any question during the interview. This practice increased the likelihood that every teacher I interviewed was genuinely interested in sharing honest perspectives and experiences. I kept notes in a reflexive journal and checked in with my chair regularly about my data collection processes. Finally, I sent every participant a copy of their interview transcript and invited a review for accuracy.

The extent to which my findings may be transferable to other contexts rests with the reader. I collected data from a variety of settings to improve transferability in the current study. The interview participants came from every region of the United States (Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Central states) and taught grades 6-12. The diversity of participant experiences, in addition to my use of thick description and contextualization, may contribute to the transferability of the findings. However, I do not intend to claim direct transferability of my findings to different contexts.

In my proposal and final dissertation, I included a strong rationale for my research methodology and ensured clear alignment across all aspects of the study. I also kept an audit trail to ensure I could write detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis processes. These practices contributed to the dependability of my research.

The reflexive journal I kept and the check-in conversations I had with my chair helped to mitigate bias and subjectivity, adding to the confirmability of my study. I also kept an audit trail throughout the data collection and analysis phases, maintaining comprehensive records for each participant. I tracked my thinking in a frequently updated Excel codebook and wrote analytic memos to describe my codes. Finally, I created visual representations of my coding process as another tool to explain my thinking.

Results

In my study, I sought to understand what enabled secondary teachers to promote belongingness for marginalized students. Using three subquestions to guide my data collection and analysis, three themes emerged from the data. The theme related to Sub-RQ1 was teacher practices that emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth. The theme related to Sub-RQ2 was a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices. The theme related to Sub-RQ3 was barriers emerged from teachers’ lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students. The results of my study are presented by research subquestion and theme. Quotes from the participants are included in each section to support the findings.

Sub-Research Question 1: Strategies for Promoting Belongingness

Sub-RQ1 was, “What are the strategies that secondary teachers use to promote belongingness for marginalized students?” The theme that emerged out of subquestion one was teacher practices that emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth. Findings from the study indicated that to promote belongingness for marginalized students, teachers should attend to outward interactions with students and the inner work required for personal growth.

Teacher–Student Interactions

The first category related to the theme from Sub-RQ1 was teacher–student interactions. Participants spoke about belongingness strategies related to teacher–student interactions student–student interactions, in and out of the classroom environment. The data showed that these interactions should be culturally responsive, should intentionally build relationships, and should educate students.

Culturally Responsive. In the responses, participants named specific strategies used in their interactions with students to develop students’ sense of belonging. The first set of strategies shared by all 11 participants centered on the use of culturally responsive practices. Participants spoke about two types of culturally responsive practices: (a) maintaining high expectations for all students, and (b) normalizing the existence of differences. According to participants, high expectations need to be coupled with appropriate scaffolds to ensure students experience success and feel a sense of belonging at school. P10 explained the concept:

I think it's about being a stable force for positive and being able to also, like, having high expectations for children, too. If I'm there every day and I do a shitty job, then that's not particularly helpful. So, it's about, it's about being stable, providing a stable force and having high expectations for children.”

Moreover, P4 shared that she uses data to identify student skills gaps because she found a correlation between skills gaps and behavior infractions. P4 connected this strategy to marginalization and belongingness:

I think that behavior piece was because they didn't have the skill. And then the reality is, if their behavior is making it so other people can't learn, then there's a hierarchy, right? Like there isn't any classroom of consequences and of, try this, and a buddy room, and the counselor. But eventually they're out of the classroom for either a short amount of time or maybe a full day. So, then they're naturally being pushed, or not naturally, but the consequence of that is they're being pushed out of their classroom, or they're not with their peers at recess, or they're not at sports practice, they're in detention. So, they're being physically marginalized in those scenarios.

Nine participants spoke about how they sought to normalize differences in their classrooms. P7 gave several examples of how she incorporates students' cultures and identities in her lessons and assessments “so it's like, normal and safe to talk about how we pull up because we are who we are and we deserve to be honored and loved.” P7 used the phrase “salt the water” to explain her approach to normalization at school. She shared

that she learned the metaphor at a professional development session she attended early in her career:

You know what happens when you put a ... saltwater fish in fresh water? They hemorrhage. So, a lot of these marginalized students, as per your definition, they're saltwater fish trying to fit in fresh water. But what if we just salt the water? You know? Like, put Vietnam on the test, teach about Puerto Rico, just take one day. And that always stuck with me.

Participants also spoke about including representation of diverse identities and perspectives in the classroom and curriculum to normalize differences. P1 said, "If we're going to talk about culture, talk about [the] culture of everyone. Fill the classrooms with signs of different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and all the rest, if you have to." In addition to visual images of diverse cultures, P2 shared that she has "a plan to work with the culture club for getting some more diverse books for our school library. You know, just getting some books where the students can kind of see themselves in the characters or the authors." Both P7 and P11 shared about the importance of finding opportunities in lessons to remove the stigma from language and identity. P7 gave an example of the strategy in action:

And I also, in my curriculum, I try to highlight, or shine a light. I call it shining a light on language. So, for example, this spring, we learned about trans-Eurasian trade during the Ancient China Silk Road. And so, I'm like, "You guys." Sorry, I keep saying that, but I don't say that in my class. I don't know why I'm saying that. "Scholars. Notice the prefix trans. Do you know what that means?" And so,

then they're like, "Oh, yeah, like transgender, across gender, trans-Eurasian, across Europe and Asia." So, in weaving it into my curriculum like that and making it very sort of benign, you know, everyday language, then it doesn't, it's not, like, taboo when we have a more serious or personal conversation.

P6 had the opportunity to redesign the U.S. History curriculum with another teacher at her school. She described a realization she had during the redesign process:

And so I, it was a realization that, in particular, with Black history, it ended with Reconstruction and then didn't start again until the Civil Rights Movement. Now it was a question I had of, "What happened in between? How come we never talk about this and how come the very few number of students I had that were students of color at that time, they don't see anything about their history?" Well, it's a history of all of us, but yeah. So, that was the, that was the linchpin/turning point of starting to investigate that sort of stuff and make sure that it's included in the curriculum. And then realizing not just Black perspectives, but many perspectives are left out of that dominant story. ... The more I included different voices, I realized who was missing, and I saw more and more perspectives missing. And then I realized the many different points of view in my class.

In addition to including multiple perspectives in the curriculum, P6 explicitly makes the connection between representation and belonging for her students. She explained she tells her marginalized students that "all different kinds of people have always existed in the world and in America. And I want to make sure you see your perspective represented, so you realize that you matter, not just to me, but to everyone around us."

Build Relationships. The second category in Theme 1 centered on the strategies participants took to build relationships with students and families. These strategies included creating psychological safety, making connections, taking a holistic approach, and communicating belonging through language and word choice. P10 described this strategy as “getting to know people as individuals and making authentic, human connections.”

Creating Psychological Safety. Ten participants talked about the need to create psychological safety, so students experience a sense of belonging in the classroom. Psychological safety was described as authenticity, vulnerability, and consistency in a space where it was okay to take risks, make mistakes, and apologize for harm. For example, P7 shared about how her students respond when she banters with them:

They’re like, “Okay, nobody talks to us like this.” I’m like, “I know, right? I just like to be real with y’all. I like to be myself, too.” So, I could be the total professional, but I also like to be down to Earth, too. And the kids appreciate that.

P6 and P10 both spoke about sharing some of their personal experiences with students to model authenticity and vulnerability. P6 described her reasons for sharing personal stories with the students:

I don’t live here. I don’t live in this community ... just pointing out the times that I’ve not, I’ve felt like I didn’t belong where I was, right? Like, communities I’ve lived in, or opportunities to go places, like when I was a kid and talking about our family maybe not having a lot of money. Or sometimes the experiences that I’ve had, I think make kids think I have all this privilege, but saying, like, I was never

on a plane until I was 18 years old. ... just sort of make myself, make my own experience seem more relatable, so I wasn't, I didn't seem like someone who was trying to make others feel different.

Similarly, P10 shared about how he shows up for his students at the beginning of the school year:

I still wake up excited every day, and that comes off as very real. I also share that I'm a first-generation college grad, first generation of my family to go to college. On the first day of school, I have epilepsy, I share that I have epilepsy. And here's what you do in case I have a seizure. So, I'm vulnerable. And my space is with them, so that creates a place where they can be vulnerable as well.

Teachers who showed up for students with authenticity and vulnerability were able to contribute to the psychological safety of the classroom.

Consistency was also mentioned as essential to creating psychological safety. P6 described how her multiply marginalized students viewed her with skepticism in the beginning of the school year:

I think they're skeptical of me, just because I'm a nonmarginalized person in most ways. I'm a woman, but other than that, I mean they're used to women as teachers. And there's just a lot of, sort of, trauma, historical trauma, and like, family trauma that they've been through that they just don't trust someone who's new.

She spoke about how it took her a long time to gain students' trust and that there was not "any artificial way to do it. ... I just consistently continued with the style that I have. ... I

think they just had to see me consistently being there and not being a different person. I guess, just being myself.”

Participants described how important it is that they establish classrooms where students feel safe to take risks and make mistakes. As P7 explained, “Our job is to work and grow together, make mistakes, have some joy.” P3 shared how she maintains psychological safety throughout the year:

I takes them a lot of patience to believe me, because it’s not a message you hear often, right? Like, oh, it’s okay to fail. That’s where you learn. ... That creating through acceptance, a space where it’s okay to make mistakes and learn from that, is probably the most overlooked strategy that teachers on my campus don’t use. ... I make mistakes too on the podium all the time. And I will call myself out on it. I’ll be like, “Oh, my gosh, guys, we need to do it again. I did that wrong. This one’s for me.” And so, it just becomes this place of mutual respect where it’s okay for me to mess up. It’s okay for them to mess up. We’re all going to get better together. So, I think modeling that I’m not 100% all the time is important too.

Finally, participants talked about the importance of apologizing to students to maintain psychological safety. P4 explained the power of an apology:

I think that willingness is also, it’s very powerful to apologize to a kid and say, “Hey, that didn’t go how I thought it was going to. Here was my intention, and I’m sorry that it didn’t work. Can you help me come up with a better solution?”

And not making it their problem, but being very open that like, “Yep, I’m human, and I made a mistake, so it didn’t work. How can we fix this?”

As an example of a willingness to apologize, P1 recounted a time when he unintentionally hurt one of his LGBTQ+ students:

Looking back a few years ago, I had to deal with a student that I think he was LGBTQ. And he came up to me and he was trying to tell me about the way people, you know, tend to stay away from him. Some persons actually look at him with some disgust and, you know, disgust looks and others. And, what came out of my mouth was, I think that was just a big mistake on my side. I’m like, “Maybe if you were straight, I think they would, you know, I actually just feel everyone would actually talk to you and welcome you.” And I didn’t mean that in a harsh way or a harmful way to hurt his feeling. Well, it was as if I’m saying he was, he kind of took it like I’m saying your sexual orientation is wrong, which is not what I meant to say, and he left. And he, I noticed he was actually avoiding me since then. And then I had to have a rethink of what I said. And I felt, oh yeah, I said something that I shouldn’t have said. He took that the wrong way. ... And then I invited him. I made him see reasons, you know, to realize that, “Oh, I don’t hate you because of your sexual orientation. I don’t, I’m not against you. I actually welcome you. And if you must have picked up my words in the wrong way, that is not what I meant. Okay? I’m happy you came out and then told us about your sexual orientation. I’m happy you are speaking out. I’m happy you carried out your pride.” I gave him ways to actually approach other kids and actually spoke, I

think I had a particular session in class where I had to talk to the whole class and the whole group about sexual orientation and how everyone should respect every other person's sexual orientation. But firstly, I had to have a one-on-one interaction with him. He told me his mind. He told me why he was avoiding me. He told me why he felt hurt. I saw that and I knew that was a mistake on my part. I only just compounded on his pain that he was getting from other kids, and I think I needed to orientate the other kids as well, so I had a session with everyone. ... And I think he felt really happy about, about that session, he felt like, oh, yeah, I would be there for him. I would stand up for him if the time came.

To promote belongingness for marginalized students, participants created psychological safety for their students by offering authenticity, vulnerability, and consistency in a space where it was okay to take risks, make mistakes, and apologize for harm.

Making Connections. Seven participants specifically described how to make connections to better understand students. Both P1 and P3 spoke about accepting invitations to attend community events and doing home visits. P3 said, "I took every opportunity that was offered to me to get out of the classroom and go meet families in homes." P3 also talked about attending community festivals "and accepting an invitation to somebody's home for dinner" as ways to learn about and build relationships with her marginalized students. She added that "getting to know people on a personal level and finding out what was important to them, especially since I was so different ... really became vital to my success." P1 recalled his own feelings after a childhood experience with a home visit from his teacher: "This just gives you a sense of trust. You're like, I

trust this teacher. You can actually go to him for anything.” P2, P5, P8, and P11 all spoke about using getting-to-know you surveys at the beginning of the year to learn about what matters to the students. P5 described giving students “a little info card where I ask them all sorts of questions. ... That helps me get a little bit of insight and things that I can talk to them about and connect to them with.” P11 also uses a similar approach with students. She explained that students “fill out five weird facts or interesting facts about [themselves] at the beginning of the year, so I get to know them.” P11 also asks students to share “anything that I need to know about you that will help you in this class.” These strategies allowed participants to make connections with their students that helped to build trusting relationships.

Holistic Approach. Participants described how students should be understood through a holistic approach, keeping in mind the life of the child outside of the classroom. As P3 described it, a holistic approach means the teacher is “just trying to create this well-informed picture to decide how to move forward.” P6 connected the desire to understand more about her students with her experience as the mother of a child who struggled to keep up with the routines of school. She shared about watching her daughter struggle and reflected on the experience:

And that, just to me, felt like we were missing who she was as a person. Like all of those, “You can’t follow all of my rules,” which I totally get why we need them, meant that that’s all people saw her as.

For P8, a holistic approach was achieved through individual conversations with students:

In these little spaces of, like, “Hey, buddy, what’s going on? You know, help me understand. I’m curious. What’s making it so that you’re tardy a lot? What’s making it so that you’re missing school? Help me understand how I can help you. How can I have some conversations with your family? And I believe family is just people who care about you. It doesn’t necessarily mean your biological mom or your biological dad. Like, who’s caring for you in your life right now? Oh, it’s your friend’s mom, okay. That makes sense. Okay.” You know, like, having that understanding of their realities.

A holistic approach gives teachers insight into students’ lives outside of school.

Communicate Belonging. Eight participants spoke about the need to explicitly communicate belonging to students. Participants shared examples of interrupting acts of exclusion, using inclusive language, and celebrating students’ perspectives and strengths. P1 summarized this idea when he said, “I stood up for everyone. I didn’t let everyone feel like I’m only focused on this set of persons or that set of persons. I stood up for everyone.” P11 also talked about speaking up for students: “If I see any kind of negative comment or remark or look from one student to another, the student that did the negative thing gets pulled aside, and I’m like, ‘So, let’s talk about this. What’s going on?’” In the same way, P3 explained that in her classroom, she will “never ever, ever tolerat[e] a kid laughing at another kid because of a mistake or ‘What is wrong with you?’ kind of thing.” P9 shared a question she uses to take a broad, schoolwide perspective and hold herself accountable to all kids: “When we’re in staff meetings, are we actually fighting for kids? Not just the ones that we have, but ones that we will never see? Because

abolition is quite literally about fighting for a dream for all students, even the ones that you don't know." In the responses, participants also spoke about the need to use inclusive language to communicate belongingness. For example, P7 shared about how her language with students has changed over time:

What's happened is my language has evolved. I used to say, "Ok, boys over here, girls over here," because the school populates the classroom, they try to balance, right? You're in your section. So, it's easy if you want to just do a 50-50 split to say, "boys and girls." I don't do that anymore.

The use of inclusive language communicates to students their identities are valued, and they belong in the classroom with everyone else.

In addition to interrupting exclusionary behaviors and using inclusive language, participants talked about celebrating students' strengths to communicate belongingness. P6 expresses how much value and potential she sees in her students by telling them, "I see you in a future that includes you in it." As another example, P3 shared a story about a former AVID student who came back to visit her from college. She saw the student's resilience and confidence and asked the student what made him so sure of himself. P3 explained what the student said about his time in P3's classroom, where she consistently communicated his value:

Just built into him this belief that like, "Yeah, I can do this. I can do this. And whether that's someone picking on me because I'm writing funny or because I look different or whatever, like, I know I have things to offer and it's gonna be okay." ... I didn't realize we were having that kind of impact. I knew

academically we were, and we knew their study skills were great, but I didn't realize that it had also changed their persona and their belief in themselves.

Other examples came from P5 and P6. P5 described how she uses a strengths-based approach to include students in her classroom:

One really easy thing is when kids share that they speak other languages, I will often use them as examples in class and talk about, like it's super easy with Spanish, for example. I speak a little bit of Spanish, so I can do some cross-linguaging things, and we can talk about Spanish structures and French structures, and then I can ask the kids who are Spanish-speaking, linguistic questions. And it's so interesting what they come up with about the process of learning languages, but also similarities and differences in French and Spanish. And they get to be an expert in front of everyone. And we really talk up in the class, like, what a strength being bi- or multilingual is.

Similarly, P6 values the inclusion of student voice in her lessons. She spoke about "creating a community of learning where we make sure that all the time, everyone's voice is important." P6 further shared that she tells her students, "We need everyone's perspective, or we can't get where we're going. ... We need to hear all of these different points of view, put it together, and make sense of what it means." It is necessary to explicitly communicate to students that they belong.

Educate Students. Eight participants named the value of explicitly educating students about how to care for each other, why it matters, and ways to build up students' own resilience and confidence. P1 and P3 shared similar ideas of building a community

of learners. P3 explained that “you have to create this community in your classroom across the board and teach everybody why it matters.” P1 described an approach he takes to educate students about belonging:

Allow them to interact with each other. I don't just let the African kids go one place and then start talking to themselves or the Asian kids. I try to set up activities that would foster this sense of communication and belonging between everybody. So, make everybody interact, come up with subjects, come up with interactive sessions. Everyone should contribute; everyone should talk. I think that actually helps to bring this sense of belonging with everyone.

Participants also considered how the strategies might differ when working with marginalized versus nonmarginalized students. P8 shared about how she tries to teach empathy and perspective-taking to her nonmarginalized students: “I'm trying to have those conversations within the requirement of the curriculum that allow them to have empathy for others and understanding of how we can navigate the complexity and the diversity of other people.” In contrast, when thinking about what she tries to teach her marginalized students, P3 spoke about giving marginalized students opportunities to identify their strengths and build confidence through collaborative inquiry and formal presentations: “Hopefully we've given them enough when they leave that they've got the skills to be able to handle whatever might be thrown at them once they go off to college or things like that.”

Attention to Personal Growth

The second category related to the theme from Sub-RQ1 was attention to personal growth. Participants shared strategies related to the personal attributes and work required to effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students. The two areas of personal growth that emerged from the data were teaching philosophy and inner work.

Teaching Philosophy. Participants valued belongingness as an essential part of their teaching philosophy and shared personal attributes and practices that contributed to enacting this value in the classroom. All 11 participants spoke about the need for intentionality, community, and flexibility when seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students. Intentionality was described as purposefully thinking about how to promote belongingness and center marginalized students every day. In his response, P1 offered advice for acting more intentionally:

Make sure you envision every day before you come to class, envision what you should say, the languages you would use that would make everyone feel belong[ing], remove every existing barriers, whatever you think you would do, that would actually make people feel left out, take it off. Come up with various ways that would make these kids feel like they belong with each other.

Similarly, both P4 and P6 spoke about embedding belongingness in planning both the curriculum and one's pedagogical moves. P4 spoke about planning for intentional inclusion:

I think from the instructional planning side, as you get your feet under you, and you don't feel like you're drowning in the classroom every day, you have time to

dig into some of those text selections, instructional moves that are going to keep kids feeling like they belong. ... So, I think planning for that intentional inclusion. And that looks different for every group. So not just every, like, every year, but every class period that looks different. And being very strategic about that is going to help everybody kind of rise to the top.

P6 also shared a similar idea about intentionality:

I definitely think that was part of the journey to transforming the curriculum part for sure and making sure that the belongingness became embedded in what we did, that it wasn't just like it's, you know, "Belonging Friday," or we talk about that in November, and then we don't talk about it any other time of year.

Another example of intentionality came from P2 when she spoke about how she creates student groups:

I do think that [it] has been very beneficial having students work in teams and mixing them up and making sure that they're getting to know not just their friends in the class, but they're having an opportunity to work with the different students that we have and the diversity in the room.

Planning for belonging was one way participants consistently engaged in practices to promote belongingness for marginalized students.

Along with intentional planning for belonging, participants talked about the need to think of ways to regularly center the experiences of marginalized students. As P10 explained, "It's about being deliberate and when you see an opportunity with a marginalized student to invite them in, do you take it? Or [find] a particular high leverage

point to build that trust.” P7 gave an example of a time when she intentionally considered how to center her marginalized students in a lesson:

I did a simulation where the students were trading saltwater taffy and Hershey gold bars in Western Africa, in Ghana. And so, again, I’m thinking. I always try to empower students who may be shy or may not be as popular or whatever it is. But because this was particularly in Africa, all but one of my five sections, I chose African American students to be the king or queen. So, my last period, I chose a student who struggled in all his classes, and he had been to our team meeting, you know, discussion, intervention, and all that ... so I chose him to be king. So, after the whole lesson everybody left, he came up to me like, real close beside me and he said, really quietly, “[P7], thank you for making me king, it made me feel special.” And I said, “You *are* special! You are so welcome.” You know, we did a little side hug. But when he left, it was like, again, like with ... the Vietnam piece and ... the Puerto Rico piece. Like, I know I’m intentionally salting the water. And it’s not every time kids will come back to me, but that gives me that feedback loop like, you know what? There’s lots of kids who I could have chosen to be king and queen, but I was trying to be intentional because it’s Africa. And again, when I was their age, I was only ever taught I was a slave. So, I wanted him to be king for all those reasons, and he was like, really leaned into that, you know?

In addition to intentionality, ten participants explained that relying on the school community and staying flexible contributed to their ability to promote belongingness for

marginalized students. Participants who specifically named community in the responses described an awareness that a teacher cannot always meet the needs of every student, every year. Instead, participants spoke about the need to collaborate with others to share knowledge, skills, and expertise for the benefit of each student. As P2 explained, “If they need other resources than what I can provide, you know we’ve got great guidance counselors at our school and just putting in a plug in for those resources.” P3 expanded this concept further when she shared some of the collaborative approaches she tries:

Talking with their other teachers. “Is this just something that’s going on in my room? Is there something in my space that’s creating this situation to happen or is it greater than that?” Pulling parent information, contacting parents or grandparents to see if there’s something going on there. I’ll often check with counselors from the middle school to see how long it’s been going on. You know, “Has this kid always kind of been this way? What’s up with that?”

Similarly, P4 talked about eating lunch every day with her grade-level team of teachers where they have informal conversations about students. When all the teachers are seeing similar concerns from a student, the team will work together:

“Who’s got the closest relationship with them? Who wants to have that conversation?” And then the next day we’ll reconvene and, or there’s, you know, the group text, “Hey, let’s try this,” or “They said this.” And then if we’re still seeing it, then we have a social worker and a school counselor on campus both full time. So, we can connect that student with that additional support.

In the responses, participants also saw flexibility as an important aspect of their teaching philosophy. Participants described flexibility as the creativity to try different approaches with students and the patience to recognize that small wins over time are part of the process of promoting belongingness for marginalized students. P1 shared how he responds when something he is trying does not work to promote belongingness for marginalized students:

Try to do things in a different way that would actually bring this sense of belongingness. If this way is not working, then you have to find a way. I think it's left for you as a teacher to actually figure out a way. If you have to go for professional trainings, I think you should do that as well. Figure out ways to make everyone feel belonging. You know, one way may not work all the time. You try it. Keep trying it. It may not work. So, you just have to find another way out.

The attribute of persistence and flexibility was echoed by P3, who spoke about “trying to find that place where they do fit and then get them into it. ... Some it takes more to find than others.”

Some participants spoke about the persistence needed to put in the time to make a meaningful difference in the lives of students. P3, P6, P7, P8, and P9 all spoke specifically about persistence as a part of staying flexible. P8 described her thoughts about persistence:

I think teaching is overwhelming and the bandwidth that's required just to do the bare minimum can make us go home and feel like we can't do anything more.

And I think we have to start maybe with the small stuff, because if we don't, then

the other side's won [laughs]. And I do think I'm part of a system that is systemically pushing the same problems that I see, and I know I'm part of the problem. And that is hard. Because there are some things I can't change, and I've tried, and I'm still working on it. But I'm still perpetuating some traumas. I know I am, in some way, because I'm part of a system that perpetuates trauma. But I'm trying my small way to maybe lessen the degree of it.

When belongingness was seen as an essential part of their teaching philosophy, participants focused on intentionality, community, and flexibility when seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students.

Inner Work. All 11 participants shared that both humility and reflection are required to engage in the inner work necessary to effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students. Humility was described by participants as the recognition that nobody is perfect, the ability to hear difficult feedback without taking it personally, and the acceptance that personal healing may be needed to allow for growth. P10 shared his perspective about humility: "You have to approach it in a humble manner with the grace of God and recognize that I am indeed fallible. And if you learn that something's not working, that means you try again." Similarly to P10, P1 spoke about humility: "If I'm not doing well, tell me about it. I'm also a human. I'm learning. So, tell me about it." Over time, P6 came to place more value on student feedback: "I think as I became a better teacher, I realized it wasn't important that I knew all of the information and that I was willing to hear from my students' perspectives." P3, P5, and P8 spoke about how to respond to difficult feedback. P3 said she starts with "the acceptance that like, whatever I

had to offer wasn't enough for what he needed." In her response, P5 shared her thoughts about feedback and humility:

I think there are some people who are like, "I can't give evaluations because I don't want to see what people really think. I don't want to hear, or I want to hear the good, but not the bad or the ugly." And I want to hear *all* those things because if I don't, I can't get better.

Similarly, P8 explained her perspective about receiving feedback:

There's so much complexity in this, though. There's a lot of it, like, "Did I do something wrong?" And that's why I like asking for feedback, even though it can be really hard and sometimes harsh. And I think that, for me, that emotional intelligence and resilience has to be part of this process. I have to give myself permission to feel and heal and deal with it because not everyone appreciates my efforts. And you're going to offend someone somewhere, and I tried so hard with that student, and I still didn't get the result I wanted, they still didn't think it was enough. ... And so, we have to provide ourselves some grace and some space to maybe retreat and to heal from some of those burning moments. And if we don't have a space to heal from that, I don't know if we're going to get a lot of growth.

Participants spoke about humility as a necessary part of the inner work required to attend to personal growth.

Along with humility, the importance of reflection was reiterated by ten participants. Like P2, most of the participants described themselves as "very reflective" teachers. P3 even went so far as to say that "people who don't reflect on the effectiveness

of what they're doing every day aren't making the mark." P5 credited the National Board process with showing her the value of reflection:

I started the National Board process, and there was so much about gaining knowledge and reflecting and reflecting and reflecting and changing your pedagogy and curriculum. And so that set that in motion for me to continually do that work. So, I think that's key.

In her response, P9 shared her perspective on being a reflective teacher:

I feel like educators who truly do value kids and their livelihood, they take reflection deeply and seriously and think about the ways in which the environment that they're a part of, that they contribute to, but then also the things that they do individually, as teachers, as educators, as having relationships with young people can do to ensure that all kids have a fighting chance at the life that they deserve when they're in front of you or when they're just in your school.

Finally, P1 described the role of reflection in his teaching career:

I think everything I've done to actually promote belongingness, I actually learned them from experience. There might be mistakes along the line. But what do you do when you do make those mistakes? Go back, sit back, and find a way to actually cross that bridge and just it's been helping me all the way.

Humility and reflection were both necessary for participants to do the inner work needed for personal growth.

Sub-Research Question 2: Perspectives About Belongingness Strategies

Sub-RQ2 was, “What are secondary teachers’ perspectives about the strategies they use to promote belongingness for marginalized students?” After sharing about strategies, participants reflected on why they thought they were able to effectively meet the belongingness needs of marginalized students. The theme that emerged out of this subquestion was a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices. Findings from the study indicated that to effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students, teachers should embody attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness.

Attentiveness

The first category related to the theme from Sub-RQ2 was attentiveness. Participants spoke about the development of an awareness and recognition of the belongingness needs of marginalized students. The data showed that humanization and care for people who are marginalized contributed to attentiveness.

According to participants, the process of humanization came through exposure to diverse people and places. Exposure led participants to feel love and empathy for other people. For many participants, exposure to diverse people and places happened through travel, art, or literature. P5 talked about the value of travel in her life:

I’m a big world traveler. I’ve been to, I think now, 26 or 27 countries or territories. And every time I travel, I understand more about people, and history, and just kind of the way the world works. And [it] gets rid of preconceived notions, gets me interested in learning more about different things. And that’s all,

that all informs my classroom and how I teach. ... Putting myself in situations where I'm not marginalized, but I'm different, and seeing how that feels. It just, it changes a person, and you look at things differently.

P8 also spoke about traveling to other parts of the world: "I think that going, living in different countries ... I had a lot of exposure to different cultures. ... I think that just seeing different cultures and having a lot of love for people really softened my heart to their experience." In addition to travel, P11 explained how exposure to art made her more open to diversity:

I think just that the study of art in general and art history in general leads you to study things that are, that are different. And we study, we study artists that were gay or lesbian or, you know, bisexual, even. And so, it's just kind of like, but we see the end result of their art. And it's still amazing.

Likewise, P8 credited books and literature for opening her up to the value of diversity:

I think that there was a deep sense of understanding of books and literature. So, I was able to see different worlds through the literature that I read. And even though it wasn't as diverse as it could have been because I just got books from the local library, and there wasn't a lot of diversity, but it still allowed me to see and have empathy. I really believe in the beauty of literature to allow us to access the experiences of others and practice it through the act of reading. And then, as I broadened out, and I think as the world started listening to different voices, I naturally started listening to different voices like, "Oh, that's a great book? Great, I'll read it." And so, I started accessing that. ... I really believe in the power of

literature. I believe we should be reading and listening all the time to other people's voices, and we're more likely to stay in that empathetic space.

P6 developed more empathy for marginalized students when she became a mother. She explained that raising her daughter in the school system "just made me look at things differently, a little bit through her eyes and through the eyes of someone who cares so much about this individual kid [be]cause they're my kid. And knowing, I didn't feel like other people cared." For participants, exposure to diverse people and places led to a growth of love and empathy for marginalized students.

Participants also described the role of care, love, and joy in their ability to remain attentive to the belongingness needs of marginalized students. P7 simply stated, "What I do is I lead with love. ... I want to understand you better, so I'm going to show up with love. That's all I got." P11 described a similar sentiment she shares with her students at the beginning of every school year: "We are all here to love and support each other. Our differences is what makes us unique and special." Likewise, P10 named love and joy as fundamental reasons he can promote belongingness for marginalized students:

As an upper middle class White man, a straight White man in America, I have a host of privileges. And so, it's really not my ability to look like the kids that I'm connecting with, but it's about bringing in an authentic love of teaching, of learning. ... Just trying to create authentic moments of joy and humor and love.

With a focus on love, participants were able to enjoy being around students and wanted the best for them. P3 responded to a question about why she can promote belongingness for marginalized students: "I like people. I know that sounds really stupid, but how many

of the teachers in our classrooms just give off this energy of not wanting to be there? I think kids feed off that.” Similarly, P9 shared that “all kids deserve [belongingness]. ... I will never be in front of a young person who doesn’t deserve to feel seen, to feel known, to feel accepted for who they are.” Attentiveness to the belongingness needs of marginalized students is achieved through humanization and care.

Responsibility

The second category related to the theme from Sub-RQ2 was responsibility. All 11 participants spoke about feeling a responsibility as teachers to promote belongingness for marginalized students. The data showed that responsibility was developed through personal history, an inclusive mindset, and the belief that promoting belongingness is a teacher’s purpose.

Whether or not a participant described experiences of belonging in their youth, personal histories contributed to participants’ feelings of responsibility toward meeting the belongingness needs of marginalized students. P1, P3, P7, P8, and P9 all shared examples of feeling excluded or othered because of some aspect of their identities. P3 talked about her experiences as a child at school and how she found a space of belonging:

I didn’t grow up feeling very belonged. And so, I want to make sure my kids don’t have that same experience. So, I try to build a school culture and a classroom that makes that a priority. ... Because nobody ever did that for me. You know what I mean? Like, I found band. Thank God, that became my safe space.

In her childhood, P7 experienced racial slurs and hatred from her peers:

I was bullied. You know, personally, from my race, I was the only Black kid in my class. ... I know intimately what it's like to be bullied and to be suicidal over it. ... I literally did not understand why people would spit on me because of the color of my skin, call me a spook and other bad things, and the N-word. I literally was confused because I thought everybody was beautiful. You know? I would look at my skin and be like, "But I like my skin. Like, I don't get it." I really just didn't, right? ... I experienced that for 18 years, you know? So, I think lived experience really comes into play.

Both P1 and P9 shared stories from adulthood. P1 talked about his time at university, when he first left his home country for the United States:

I, for one, I know how it went during my undergraduate days in the university. I think that thing actually changed the way I feel about people, marginalized people, because coming in Black in a, in a pretty much White university, I felt left out, and I know the pains that people feel being marginalized. So, I wanted to change where we start. I wanted to be able to help. I wanted to be able to bolster oneness and make everybody feel this sense of belonging in everything they do. So, that feeling back in my undergraduate days actually made me to change the way I think.

As a young teacher joining a mostly White staff, P9 spoke about "feeling just like an outsider to a community." She went on to explain why she feels a responsibility to her marginalized students:

I think as a person who has been marginalized in different ways, you identify with students in that way, and you want to be able to create a space where they feel, I wouldn't even say empowered, because that's the belief, right, that we're giving something back to our students. But to, like, elevate the power that they already have within their identities, because we feel, people who identify with those kids, we feel in some way that that power in our life has been taken away or diminished in some way throughout our career, throughout our life, and that we don't want students to feel that same way.

Each participant who shared stories of not belonging explained how they used these experiences to be the teachers they needed as children.

Alternatively, P5 and P10 talked about having positive experiences with belonging that made them want to give the same to their students. P10 shared a story about a former teacher:

I still text my AP Government teacher from 2003 once or twice a week.

Sometimes that's about gambling. Sometimes that's about life in the world. We have that authentic connection, and I know when my father was killed, he came to the funeral. He drove 2 hours. And it's just about, I know how good it feels to have a connection with an adult in your life that you look up to. Though we're now peers. So, how can I return that to children?

Just as examples of not belonging motivated some participants to create spaces of belonging for marginalized students, experiences of belonging made other participants want to offer the same experience to kids.

Alongside personal history, having an inclusive mindset contributed to the responsibility participants felt toward marginalized students. P3 succinctly explained her inclusive mindset: “There’s a place for everybody.” It is important to recognize that belongingness matters to kids. This idea was shared by P2 when she said that “in middle school, everybody just wants to fit in. A lot of students don’t like to stand out. Everybody just wants to feel like they belong and fit in.” Likewise, P9 shared, “All kids need to feel that they’re seen and known, and so, ways that we can promote that as much as possible by differentiating things, not just even day-to-day, but student-to-student is of utmost importance.” P10 added to this belief when he shared his perspective: “It’s just about simple compassion and empathy for others. And how do you see the humanity in people? And I think that’s really, really important.”

Because inclusion is important, P11 explained, “I try really hard to make the kids understand that everyone is equal in the room and that everyone deserves the same kind of treatment.” Similarly, as P6 shared, part of an inclusive mindset means she is always working toward “creating a community of learning where we make sure that all the time, everyone’s voice is important.” P4 talked about why this mindset matters when she explained, “I know that these strategies to include everybody, it’s kind of like when one boat floats to the top, everybody’s going to float to the top.” P8 shared her feelings about colleagues who complain about the increasing diversity at her school:

You know, the stuff that people say, like, “I can’t even say that kid, person’s name.” You’re like, “Did you try? Did you spend 30 seconds on Google Translate

to maybe see how to pronounce that person's name? They have a name, and they deserve to have their name be said. So, let's say it."

An inclusive mindset added to participants' sense of responsibility toward promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Lastly, participants shared a belief that promoting belongingness is part of a teacher's purpose. P7 spoke about her purpose as a teacher:

Why am I even a teacher? To help increase children's life chances across the board. Whoever shows up in front of me. I don't know what they did last year. I'm not here to complain about it. ... So, however kids pull up, let's go. We got 10 months together. Let's do it.

In a similar vein, P6 asked questions about what matters most at school:

Is it important that you pass, that everyone passes this test, or is it important that people feel like their identity is valued, that they see themselves reflected in America, things like that? ... But in the end, it's like, you're learning to become a person, and to me, that felt so much more important.

P10 shared a comparable value when he spoke about teaching humans, not robots:

There's no other way. I think, we're not teaching robots, we're teaching humans, and that authentic human connection is so vital. And I, if I had robots who could study and get 100 every time, then I think there'd be a lot of, that would suck the joy out of the work. We're building human beings. And so, I don't see another way. I mean maybe I'm just, I'm blinded by, "Well, pull out the textbook children

and do the work.” Like, what is that? That’s not learning. That’s not an experience.

When asked to share more about why he was able to prioritize student belongingness over content delivery, P10 simply stated, “Because that’s the right thing to do. It’s the right thing to do. Full stop. I mean, we teach children. We don’t teach college acceptances or test scores. We teach children.” Participants developed a sense of responsibility to promote belongingness for marginalized students through personal history, an inclusive mindset, and the belief that promoting belongingness is a teacher’s purpose.

Competence

The third category related to the theme from Sub-RQ2 was competence. All 11 participants described how they developed the abilities and skills to promote belongingness for marginalized students. The data showed that competence was improved by seeking needed learning and connecting with mentors and colleagues who make each other better.

Participants were adept at identifying gaps in knowledge about promoting belongingness for marginalized students and deliberately chose learning opportunities to fill those gaps. P8 explained the value of curiosity and wonder in her life:

I think that’s part of being a teacher. Sometimes you feel like you have to know it all, rather than feeling like you are supposed to always be learning. I think there’s two camps. I see a lot of teachers be like they’re in one camp or the other, unfortunately. And I’ve definitely shifted myself into curiosity and wonder and

knowing that I have gaps. I'm still in my process of growing as a human being. I still have experiences that I need to process ... and I have [a] responsibility to help others to do that as well. And so that shift of, "I have to know it all," into curiosity about other humans was part of my journey.

Similarly, P5 explained the importance of filling her gaps in knowledge:

I have to keep on learning myself. I have to use ... primary source resources, resources from historically marginalized populations. Instead of me just thinking, "Oh, this must be how they feel." That's not right. I need to hear it from them and listen.

When P7 realized she did not know how to support her LGBTQ+ students, she attended training with an open mind, even though she experienced personal challenges with understanding and accepting a gender identity spectrum. She shared about what motivated her to learn more: "Because I am devoted to making sure my students belong in my classroom, I was like, okay, let me take an inquiry stance, which I do with everything, and keep learning, which I did. I went through the training." Similarly, P9 shared an example of a time when a transgender student at her school was hurt, and the learning opportunity she took to get better for LGBTQ+ students:

There was a time just a few years ago, like, a quick story. It was my very first student that I ever had that was openly trans. And I kinda feel like the students widely accepted this person, but it was mainly staff who were making comments to the student and making the student feel unwelcome and then it ended up rubbing off on the kids, of course. And that same year, there were many times that

the student had reported things that educators had said to other staff members, and nothing was ever done about it. It was just blanket statements by our principal, you know, “If this ever happens again, this is Title IX violation, we’re going to have to get the union involved.” But nothing ever happened. So of course, it continued. It got so bad with rubbing off on the kids that there was a planned act of violence against this student, and the student was jumped in the hallway at the end of one week. And what’s the worst part about that is that the student knew that it was going to happen, and they chose not to tell anyone during that time because they said, “I knew you weren’t going to protect me anyway,” when my principal asked. And so, that really caused me to reflect and just think about the techniques or any of the strategies that anyone thought that we were doing, initiatives that we thought that we were progressing towards, clearly - full stop - if a student says, “I knew that you weren’t going to protect me,” that means that something that we’re doing isn’t working. And so, I dedicated myself that summer to finding something that I could do to develop myself because I do think that professional development specifically around promoting belonging for LGBTQ students is just something we don’t talk about. Not in maybe a negative sense that we just don’t want to talk about it, but I think a lot of people are scared to be wrong, scared to not know what to do for those students or how to talk about what they don’t know. And so, I went to [major US city] for 2 weeks with a cohort of teachers from across the United States, and I was part of a National

Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute with the [State] Historical Society.

After the summer training, P9 used her new learning to develop an elective course about feminism, which included LGBTQ+ history and perspective. She reflected that “those students who were LGBTQ, they would feel that for the first time in all of our curriculum that we had at our school, that they were seen.” Participants’ competence to promote belongingness for marginalized students was improved by identifying knowledge gaps and seeking out learning opportunities to fill those gaps.

Along with professional learning, participants talked about the need be surrounded by friends and colleagues who inspired, mentored, and challenged them to be better teachers. P9 spoke about the role of mentors: “I think both mentors and co-conspirators in the work are equally as important to overcoming and trying to provide that sense of belonging for your students.” In his response, P1 gave credit to a friend who pushed his thinking and helped him become more accepting of differences:

I had a friend. He helped me out. And I got to understand that everyone is the same, you ought to treat everyone the same. You don’t really need to marginalize anyone, irrespective of sexual orientation or irrespective of color, or disabilities, or belief. You know, everyone has to be included. ... The good thing is, he was African like me and [an] immigrant, also. So, he was here before me and he was like, “Hey, boy, this is the United States. You don’t do that. We’ve left Africa. You keep that behind you. You’re back in the U.S. now. We do things that way over here.” And I think he actually showed me around. He was like, “Do things

this way, don't do it the way we do it in Africa. When you come to Rome, you behave like the Romans." ... I'm really grateful to that friend.

Similarly, P4, P6, and P11 shared examples of teachers who served as mentors and collaborators. P4 described her early experiences with mentorship at school:

I started as a resource teacher who did push-in for two periods of the day. So, I got to see some different, well I got to see a lot of different teaching models. But I got to see, I was in a veteran teacher's classroom who is a product of our schools, is a product of our community. He's a very solid teacher. So, being able to see that and see the different, even just things like the grouping strategies and how those change. And then being able to say ... "Hey, wait, I saw you do this. Why?"

P6 talked about a grade-level team member who learned alongside her: "There was one other social studies teacher in eighth grade, who was someone who was a mentor, and we worked very closely together. We went on the journey together." In her response, P11 described the relationship she had with two older teachers who supported her and gave her new insights and perspectives:

Having really good teacher friends to be able to recognize, you know, "Hey, I'm getting along with every kid in this class, except for this one. Is it just me or is it the kid? Or what's happening?" And just have them come in and kinda, you know, suss things out. That's been helpful having other people's opinions to help with that as well.

Collaborating with and learning from friends and educators who could share additional perspectives was one way participants grew in competence.

Additionally, P5, P8, and P9 all shared examples of educator groups they were part of that inspired and challenged them to grow as teachers. For example, P5 spoke at length about the value she gained from spending time in community with a group of award-winning teachers:

I was an NEA Foundation Global Learning Fellow. And for the very first time, I was in a whole room full of educators from around the country that were Teachers of the Year in their states. They were National Board Certified Teachers. I was not at the time. They were doing all these huge things, and I had a little bit of impostor syndrome. I was like, “Oh my God. Do they know? Did they pick the right person?” And it was really impressive to look at their résumés, but also to be around them and realize that as a population, they complained a lot less. And it was, there was so much talk about educational innovation and cool things that are going on in the classroom. And I was surrounded by people who were hungry for knowledge. And I thought, “This is awesome.” And I also am kind of built like, if being a full-time student were an occupation, sign me up! So, it was inspiring. And I thought, “Okay, they are setting a bar. I need to get there.”

Likewise, P8 gave an example of a powerful group of educators who helped her grow:

I surrounded myself with people who were further along in their understanding of other humans. They were really emotionally intelligent, and I was able to glean from that emotional intelligence and develop my own. And that just started making me feel hungry for my own growth, and it made it easier for me to acknowledge that I had gaps rather than just being like, “Oh, I know it all.”

According to P9, the educator groups you join do not need to physically be in the same space. She reflected on how she overcame barriers to promoting belongingness for marginalized students:

I think something that helped me to overcome it was to find community with like-minded educators, even if they were not in close proximity to me. So, affinity groups have been extremely helpful, and I think they have multiple benefits for educators for different reasons, but especially when you feel alone early on in your career, you don't feel like you have someone to hold onto or to get you through times or to thought partner with. Different groups that I was a part of [and] organizations that I joined early on in my career have become the stronghold for me throughout my career, to be able to exchange ideas with other people and to know that there were other people experiencing the same thing as me. Which doesn't always provide relief, but it's nice to know that it's not a unique experience. But then also to problem solve ways to overcome those things with other people who were experiencing it in real time, just like I was.

In the responses, all 11 participants explained they developed the abilities and skills to promote belongingness for marginalized students by seeking needed learning opportunities and connecting with mentors and colleagues who make each other better.

Responsiveness

The fourth category related to the theme from Sub-RQ2 was responsiveness. All 11 participants spoke about how they consider, learn about, and respond to the

belongingness needs of their marginalized students. The data showed responsiveness involved paying attention to students and individualizing students' experiences.

Participants shared about how being responsive to the belongingness needs of their marginalized students required them to ask for direct feedback. P11 explained how she gathers feedback from students:

Oh, I just ask them. I just ask them. You know, I mean, I'll be like, "Do you feel comfortable here? Is there anything that I can do to make you feel more comfortable?" Yeah, I just ask 'em because I don't know. I think I'm doing an okay job, but if I'm not, tell me.

Other participants shared similar ideas. P10 said, "It's just that one-to-one check-in. 'How are you? How is the class? How can I help you? What do you need from me?' I find that that's such a powerful question. One I often will use with marginalized students." P1 shared several examples of how he gets feedback from marginalized students about their experiences with belongingness:

You know, one-on-one discussions as well, one-on-one interviews, like we're doing. Focus groups, get feedback, tell everyone to add their view. Let's talk. Let's sit down. Let's talk. So, focus group interviews, visits, going to their home, asking them what I've done and what I have not done better, getting feedback. If you have to give them forms, a few, you know, "Give me feedback. Tell me what I've done and what I've not done right, so I could actually promote belongingness, because I don't want you to feel left out. I don't want you to feel like I don't care about you. That is not my intention." ... If things are not going

right, the strategies you've used, invite kids over, talk things with them. Let them express their views. Let them tell you what they think.

Some participants observed student behaviors before inviting them into a conversation.

P3 described how she tries to observe student behaviors:

I try to read body language first. Like, you know, is this hitting? Is this not?

What's going on? I'll speak to the kids directly about it, whether it's, I try to do that privately. If there's a kid that doesn't fit in, they don't want to be called out in front of the class. So, and I say fit in loosely, you know what I mean? So, trying to speak with them independently.

P2 considered students who seem to be struggling with belonging: "We could definitely pull those individual students and have individual conversations." P6 also explained how she checks in with her students:

I don't think it's a systematic thing. I think it's more just, observational and some of those SEL check-in questions about, "How are you doing? What are the things that are stressing you out? What are the things that are an obstacle at school to being successful?" Because it is definitely hard, I know they have some sizable challenges at home.

Participants also talked about more formal surveys and feedback forms given to students at regular intervals during the school year. P8 collects frequent feedback about what is or is not working in class:

We do a lot of anonymous surveys that I think are helpful for students to be able to speak to their experiences. And sometimes it's just as simple as, high point/low

points, roses/thorns. ... And making sure that when I ask for it, I'm also asking for what didn't go well and why. I think a lot of times teachers, when they ask for feedback, it's just like, "Let me know if you like anything, if you like it or not!" Whereas I require students to be like, no, "What worked and what didn't?" And I want the whys behind it, because we're in an English classroom, so we make claims, we back up our claims. And I want to know specifics, and I want to be able to honor your voice.

In her response, P4 shared about an end-of-course evaluation she gives her students:

At the end of every class, like at the end of the semester, because we're on a block schedule, I always have students fill out an evaluation. And one of the questions is, "Did you feel safe in this classroom? Why or why not?"

At the end of each school year, P7 also gives students an opportunity to share feedback:

I have the students give me a teacher report card ... I'm in particular looking like, "Do you see yourself represented? Do you feel comfortable, et cetera? Does anything make you uncomfortable in class?" You know? So, the kids give me feedback on my teaching [in] general, but I'm looking, like I said, the antenna is up for students.

According to participants, asking for feedback is essential to responsiveness because, as P8 reflected, "I also believe if I didn't ask for it, I don't think a lot of those students would have had the courage to independently offer that to me." Teachers need to actively seek feedback from marginalized students about experiences with belongingness.

Participants also explained that to be responsive to the belongingness needs of marginalized students, they needed to use individualized practices. P1 shared his perspective about individualization:

I would say you should consider the fact that everyone is not coming from the same place. Socioeconomic background, cultural background, and the rest, you will not treat everyone almost the same way. You should treat everyone the same, but you know what I'm talking about, you should know that there are different approaches to the way you would approach a new Asian kid in class. There are different approach to the way you approach people with disabilities, don't make them feel left out.

P2 offered a similar reminder about individualizing for student needs:

I think it's important to consider that, you know, even though they all might be grouped together as marginalized, they're still individual students with their own different, unique personalities and they may or may not appreciate different approaches. You know, you're going to have students that want to kind of blend in and fit more in, and then you're going to have others that might be more willing to share about their uniqueness and their differences and their experiences. So, just making sure you know your students and their individual personalities.

Similarly, P3 and P9 talked about the need to see each student as a unique person whose needs differ from others, even from students who share their marginalized status. P9 spoke about the uniqueness of each student:

It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, of course, when we're talking about belonging. But then also when you do know students who might be part of a particular marginalized group, they're not monoliths. And so even within their own individual experiences, you might know one student who belongs to an LGBTQ group, but that doesn't mean that their experience is universal to all students of that group. And so, what might have worked for you teaching seventh grade with five kids who expressed that this was the best thing that you ever did with them to help them feel seen and known, that might not work with the other kids that you meet who maybe are in 12th grade and they're living in a different space or experiencing the world in a different way. And so, thinking about the ways in which we can promote belonging individually for our kids is so important rather than, I think that we think, well, if, the majority of the class felt good about it, it was good enough.

In the same way, P3 shared her perspective about what is most important to remember about promoting belongingness for marginalized students:

That there's not a cookie-cutter answer for every kid. Just like there isn't for us as adults. Like, it's going to need to be highly individualized. ... And so, it takes time and effort and individuality to find that in your students. And patience. I think a lot of us don't have patience.

According to participants, responsiveness requires teachers to consider, learn about, and respond to the belongingness needs of marginalized students by paying attention to students and individualizing students' experiences.

Sub-Research Question 3: Barriers to Promoting Belongingness

Sub-RQ3 was, “What barriers do secondary teachers identify in seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students?” I asked about barriers so participants could reflect on what was needed to overcome those barriers and more effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students. The data show that barriers emerged from teachers’ lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students. Specifically, participants named a lack of attentiveness and a lack of competence as barriers to promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Lack of Attentiveness

Seven participants described experiences in their upbringing that contributed to an inability to recognize the different needs of marginalized students related to belongingness. For P1 and P7, the initial inability to extend belonging to marginalized LGBTQ+ students stemmed from religious and cultural beliefs. P1 explained that “people with sexual orientation ... we’re kind of, you know, limited with our ways of dealing with them. So, I’ll say the one thing that actually limited me back then was my cultural background and religion.” Similarly, P7 described a staff meeting she attended earlier in her career when she was told she needed to take a training about the language of gender identity:

We had to go to PD and use certain language in our classroom with regard to gender identity. And I think it was just the way it was presented. I immediately felt somewhat, not defensive, but I was reflective about my own beliefs. I happen to be a Christian. So, I felt some internal struggle, like, I want my students to

belong. But this is a new area for me and to tell me that I have to do this, in this way, just made me feel tense.

Three participants specifically noted they grew up in mostly homogenous environments and were part of the majority group. As P3 shared, in the state she was raised, “there’s not a whole lot of color diversity there ... everybody was White.” She explained the impact of this experience on her awareness of marginalization:

And so not really understanding, like, I felt marginalized because, I think, being a band kid and being overweight and being on the smarter end of things, those are all reasons for people to get kind of pushed aside. But I didn’t really understand how that feeling was also impacted by culture. Because everybody sort of looked the same that I did.

P6 also considered how her identity became a barrier when she shared, “I think just my own lack of understanding of what it feels like to be marginalized. I think [it] kept me from understanding that because I couldn’t put myself in their shoes.”

Similarly, participants who were raised in an environment where people did not have conversations about marginalization or difference found it difficult to talk about these issues when confronted with them as a teacher. P8 explained that “part of my culture was also just, there are just some things you just didn’t even acknowledge or say or even thought to give space for some of these conversations.” Avoiding discussions about marginalization or difference can lead to discomfort or fear when the topics come up. As P2 described, “I just feel like sometimes, I don’t know, bringing those things to attention almost sometimes makes things uncomfortable.” Experiences in participants’

upbringing led to a lack of attentiveness to the belongingness needs of marginalized students.

Lack of Competence

The second barrier to promoting belongingness for marginalized students was a lack of competence. Seven participants identified that a lack of knowledge, skill, or cultural awareness prevented them from serving marginalized students well. P4 summed up this barrier when she said that “the two biggest things for me were knowledge of how to incorporate and make sure that belongingness was explicit and planned for, so that lack of knowledge.” Additionally, P3 specifically named “a lack of cultural awareness for me in my early career” as a barrier to promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Participants also shared perspectives about why they lacked the knowledge, skill, or cultural awareness to promote belongingness for marginalized students. P5 explained that “it’s the things that I don’t know because it’s not a part of my lived experience, for one, and lack of knowledge, for two, and my own issue of not seeking it out when I absolutely should’ve.” In contrast, P8 attributed her lack of knowledge in part to superficial training sessions about diversity and difference:

My training included things like Gardner’s different kinds of intelligences. But it wasn’t necessarily through the lens of, “How do we allow students to thrive?” It was just, “Acknowledge that we all have differences, and we learn differently, but we’re still going to mostly teach the curriculum this way.” ... The training is not in-depth enough to really help us to, for lack of a better word, convert people to

this understanding. So, it feels like a task you're supposed to do rather than a belief system that we understand.

A lack of knowledge, skill, and cultural awareness contributed to participants' lack of competence to effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students early in their teaching careers.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of my study. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) Teacher practices that emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth (Theme 1); (b) a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practice (Theme 2); and (c) barriers emerged from teachers' lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students (Theme 3). In Chapter 5, I discuss my interpretation of the findings and present my conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I used a basic qualitative design to explore the perspectives through the conceptual framework of ethic of care. After conducting an extensive literature review, I found a gap in the literature concerning secondary teachers' perspectives about what enables them to promote belongingness, particularly for marginalized students. For the current study, I interviewed 11 elite secondary teachers in the United States who teach marginalized students and explicitly value equity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, or belongingness for marginalized students. In my analysis, three themes emerged from the data: (a) Teacher practices emphasized teacher–student interactions and attention to personal growth (Theme 1); (b) a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices (Theme 2); and (c) barriers emerged from teachers' lack of awareness and knowledge about the belongingness needs of marginalized students (Theme 3).

Interpretation of the Findings

I found that teachers' strategies should attend to both teacher–student interactions and teachers' personal growth. Strategies for promoting belongingness for marginalized students included culturally responsive practices, building relationships, and focusing on the inner work of humility, reflection, intentionality, flexibility, and valuing community. I also found that a caring stance was cultivated through intentional, empathy-oriented practices. Participants shared their perspectives about why they could effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students: (a) attentiveness as a result of humanization and

care; (b) responsibility that developed from personal history, an inclusive mindset, and the belief that promoting belongingness is a teacher's purpose; (c) competence that was improved by seeking needed learning and connecting with strong, supportive, and inspiring mentors and colleagues; and (d) responsiveness through paying attention to students and individualizing students' experiences. Finally, I found that barriers emerged when teachers lacked awareness or knowledge about meeting the belongingness needs of marginalized students. According to participants, the most common barriers to promoting belongingness for marginalized students were a lack of attentiveness and a lack of competence. Many of the findings confirm the existing literature, but my research extends the knowledge in the discipline of education by adding the perspectives of secondary teachers and highlighting the role of personal growth in promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Findings Related to Peer-Reviewed Literature

The phenomenon of interest in the current study was the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. I conducted a thorough literature review and identified four themes in the recent literature: belongingness and marginalized students, promoting belongingness, care and relationship at school, and inclusive teaching practices. I compare my findings with what was found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2.

Belongingness and Marginalized Students

All 11 participants spoke about the need to promote belongingness for marginalized students. In their research, Grover et al. (2021) found that students of color,

students living in poverty, and students who identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community reported feeling less connected at school and did not see school as a place of community. These identity groups were the three most frequently referenced by the current study's participants in interview responses. All 11 participants considered students of color when speaking about perspectives and experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In her responses, P8 spoke more than the other 10 participants about promoting belongingness for students living in poverty. She relayed a story about her experience developing love and empathy after living among a community of people who suffered in extreme poverty. Additionally, P1, P7, P8, P9, and P11 shared their efforts to understand and support LGBTQ+ students as they sought to promote belongingness for these students. Specifically, P1, P7, and P9 identified targeted learning that was needed to fill gaps in understanding about the LGBTQ+ community.

Bettencourt (2021) found that students with multiple marginalized identities faced even more challenges to their experiences of belonging, which highlighted a need to explore and understand marginalized students' experiences through a lens of intersectionality. This finding is confirmed by P9's perspectives about how students with multiple marginalized identities needed to see all their intersecting identities represented equally in importance. In speaking about how her students are not only Black or only LGBTQ+, P9 reinforced the idea that recognizing and understanding intersectionality is necessary to promote belongingness for marginalized students.

Promoting Belongingness

My participants shared strategies and perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Greenwood and Kelly (2019), Booker (2021), and Howansky et al. (2022) found that teachers contributed to student belongingness by nurturing positive relationships, providing academic and emotional support, communicating to students they were valued and respected, and engaging in caring, consistent, and collaborative practices with students. In their research, Dearth-Wesley et al. (2023) found a positive association between teacher connection and school belonging. Similarly, participants in my study described how they built relationships with marginalized students by creating psychological safety, making connections, taking a holistic approach, and communicating belonging. For example, P4 made explicit connections between providing academic support and creating a sense of belonging for her marginalized students. P6 spoke several times about the role of consistency in her interactions with marginalized students. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of communicating care and belonging to marginalized students.

Care and Relationship at School

All 11 of my participants identified care and relationship as essential to promoting belongingness for marginalized students. As Osher et al. (2020) found, adolescents need to have positive relationships with competent, caring adults. Participants in my study consistently referenced a fundamental belief that caring for students is at the heart of teaching. Dávila and Linares (2020) found that empathy and trust must be cultivated through relationships built over time, using patience and flexibility to create more safe

and welcoming classrooms. Likewise, participants in my study described flexibility as the creativity to try different approaches with students and the patience to recognize that small wins over time are part of the process of promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In two studies, Walls et al. (2021) and Garcia et al. (2021) found that teachers were better able to promote belongingness when afforded collaborative time to work with each other and when they prioritized collaboration with students to ensure they codesigned meaningful caring practices. In my study, participants noted collaboration with other teachers and responsiveness to student needs were necessary components of promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Conroy and Ehrensall (2021) found that educators who embraced authenticity and relationships were better able to lead with care. Authenticity was a key component of creating psychological safety as described by participants in my study.

In contrast, Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2020) learned from students who did not feel a strong sense of belonging that they thought teachers were trying their best, but fell short of developing supportive, caring relationships with students because of institutional pressures to meet certain academic benchmarks. Walls (2022) also found that federal accountability expectations for teachers created tension in teachers' efforts to develop caring relationships with students. In my study, P10 similarly named the pressure to meet certain academic and standardized testing goals as a barrier to promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Inclusive Teaching Practices

All 11 participants in my study described examples of inclusive, culturally responsive teaching as strategies for promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Andrews et al. (2019) found that strong relationships between teachers and marginalized students are supported by enacting equity-minded, culturally responsive teaching practices. Participants in my study shared examples of normalizing marginalized identities and perspectives, embedding diverse representation throughout the classroom and curriculum, and acting as a warm demander. For example, P7 spoke about her efforts to “salt the water” by including aspects of her students’ identities and cultures in lessons and assessments.

In a study about inclusive teaching practices, Abreu et al. (2019) found that professors’ lived experiences affected their ability to engage in culturally sustaining practices. This finding aligns with the findings of my study, which included participants’ perspectives about how their personal histories and upbringing affected their ability to promote belongingness for marginalized students. Furthermore, Min et al. (2021) found that pushback from others and lack of time, cultural competence, knowledge, and skill with culturally responsive teaching were barriers to enacting culturally responsive practices. Similarly, participants in my study explained that a barrier to promoting belongingness for marginalized students was a lack of knowledge, skill, and cultural awareness.

Extending Knowledge in the Discipline

In addition to confirming much of the literature about belongingness, some of my findings extend knowledge in the discipline of education. First, the findings of my study add the perspective of secondary teachers to the body of literature on the topic. Next, participants in my study spoke frequently about the need to attend to their personal growth as a strategy for promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Nowhere in the existing literature did I find mention of teachers sharing their perspectives about the inner work needed to promote belongingness for marginalized students. However, I found that, in addition to the external moves between teachers and students, all 11 of my participants shared strategies related to the personal attributes and work required to effectively promote belongingness for marginalized students. The two areas of personal growth that emerged from the data were teaching philosophy and inner work. I found that inner work meant developing humility and engaging in critical self-reflection. Humility included the acceptance that nobody is perfect, the ability to hear difficult feedback without taking it personally, and the recognition that personal healing may be needed to allow for growth. Critical self-reflection was a practice of honestly assessing actions, interactions, emotions, and shortcomings to be able to grow and offer spaces of true belonging to marginalized students.

The findings of my study further extend the literature about barriers to promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Participants confirmed existing research that shows teachers who do not effectively meet the belongingness needs of marginalized students may lack awareness of the different needs of marginalized students related to

belongingness. Participants in my study extended the understanding of this barrier by sharing how their lack of awareness was due to experiences in their upbringing.

Participants described three ways their personal histories contributed to an inability to recognize the belongingness needs of marginalized students: (a) religious and cultural beliefs, (b) growing up in mostly homogenous environments where they were part of the majority group, and (c) being raised in an environment where they did not engage in conversations about marginalization or difference. This perspective was not present in the existing literature prior to my study.

Findings in the Context of the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that grounded the study was ethic of care. Tronto (1993) described the four elements of ethic of care: (a) the attentiveness that leads a person to care about an issue or person, (b) the responsibility a person feels in a relationship to take care of the issue or person, (c) the competence to adequately give care to the issue or person, and (d) the responsiveness necessary to consider and commit to meeting needs as they are expressed by the person receiving care. By integrating attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness in the practice of care, the person caring may provide proper care (Tronto, 1993).

Furthermore, Sevenhuijsen (2018) added insight to the concept of attentiveness by explaining the dual roles of attention to self and others. Sevenhuijsen noted that, without first paying attention to oneself and engaging in critical self-reflection about one's caring interactions with others, a caregiver will not be able to give adequate attention to the needs of the people under their care. Sevenhuijsen emphasized caring for oneself, staying

aware of one's needs, and seeking to heal one's inner wounds as necessary steps to consciously care for others. These concepts are confirmed by the participants in my study regarding the attention to personal growth and inner work needed to promote belongingness for marginalized students. For example, when speaking about the role of critical self-reflection in her practice, P8 explained how emotional intelligence, resilience, and space for healing need to be part of her reflective process.

The findings of this study are closely aligned with the four ethical elements of care in the conceptual framework. After categorizing the data in response to Sub-RQ2, I found that the results fit easily within the four ethical elements of care. Participants perceived they were able to promote belongingness for marginalized students because they were attentive to belongingness needs, felt a responsibility to promote belongingness, were competent about how to promote belongingness, and were responsive to feedback from marginalized students. The findings showed that (a) attentiveness required humanization and care for people who are marginalized; (b) responsibility was developed through personal history, an inclusive mindset, and the belief that promoting belongingness is a teacher's purpose; (c) competence was improved by seeking needed learning and connecting with mentors and colleagues who make each other better; and (d) responsiveness involved paying attention to students and individualizing students' experiences. According to participants in my study, efficient care happens when all four elements of care are met.

Conversely, inefficient care occurs when one or more elements of care are missing, neglected, or unmet. Participants in my study identified barriers to promoting

belongingness for marginalized students, including a lack of awareness (attentiveness) and a lack of knowledge (competence). When these two elements of care were missing, participants were ineffective at promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was restricting the criteria for participation to teachers who were members of NNSTOY or were NBCT. I included a well-developed rationale for my decision, but it was still a limitation because the perspectives of elite teachers may differ from those of regular teachers. However, that decision did not mean the elite teachers who participated in my study did not offer meaningful perspectives. The findings of my study included important insights that can be shared with teachers more broadly. Secondary teachers across the United States may understand more about promoting belongingness for marginalized students by learning about the perspectives of the elite teachers who participated in this study.

A second limitation was that, as the primary data collection tool, I risked letting my biases influence the data collection process. As a fellow educator who cares about belongingness for marginalized students, I ran the risk of projecting my personal perspectives about the topic onto participants' responses and comparing their teaching experiences to my own. If I viewed the data through my personal perspectives, I could have made interpretations of the data that went beyond the participants' meanings. I maintained a critical inquiry stance by using reflexive journaling and seeking feedback from my dissertation chair. I also asked follow-up questions as needed during the interviews to give my participants a chance to expound on their ideas and provide more

specificity in a response. If I had allowed my biases to influence my interpretations of the data, I would not have been able to inductively discover what the data were revealing about the topic. Therefore, the confirmability of my study may have been compromised. Furthermore, the discipline of education would be no further along in understanding the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students than it was prior to my study.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend further research about the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. From the limitations of this study, one recommendation for further research is to explore the perspectives of secondary teachers who do not come from an elite pool of educators. Teachers do not need to have earned national recognition to hold insights that may be important to the field of education. Adding these additional teachers' perspectives of promoting belongingness for marginalized students to the body of knowledge could further extend understanding of the topic.

Additionally, I recommend future research to explore elementary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. The developmental stages for children in elementary school differ from adolescents in middle and high school. It is important for researchers to understand the perspectives of elementary teachers in addition to secondary teachers to know similarities and differences between perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students at both levels of development.

Another recommendation for future research is to explore the perspectives of teachers who share one or more marginalized identities with their students compared with teachers who do not share any marginalized identities with their students. Examining and comparing these different teacher perspectives can further extend the understanding of the promotion of belongingness for marginalized students. My participants referred to their identities when sharing their perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students, but exploring and understanding teachers' experiences with marginalization went beyond the scope of my study.

A final recommendation for further research is to explore the perspectives of marginalized students in relation to their teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness. All my participants were reflective and vulnerable in their interview responses, but I was unable to verify with their students that efforts to promote belongingness were as effective as teachers believed. Researchers may find value in learning from teachers whose marginalized students confirm they experienced a strong sense of belonging in their classrooms.

Implications

The results of my study may contribute to positive social change in education because an increased understanding of secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students may lead to improved levels of belonging for marginalized students. Researchers have found that higher levels of belongingness are correlated with an increase in well-being and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2022; Aziz et al., 2024; Grover et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Marginalized students

are particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes when their sense of belonging at school is threatened or challenged (Allen, 2020; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Participants shared many important perspectives in the current study, including the belief that promoting student belongingness is a fundamental responsibility of teachers. If secondary teachers can learn from the insights shared by my participants, they may become more effective at promoting belongingness for marginalized students. In turn, marginalized students may experience more academic success and a higher quality of life.

In Chapter 2, I found nearly twice as many quantitative as qualitative studies about belongingness, though qualitative studies are becoming more common. Less common are qualitative studies about the perspectives of teachers, the very people charged with promoting belongingness. I identified only one recent study of teachers' perspectives, but it was limited to exploring how teachers implemented strategies to create a sense of belonging for students (Booker, 2021). The findings of my study add to the body of qualitative research on the topic. My findings also show evidence that more qualitative studies about the phenomenon of belongingness for marginalized students are needed. A recommendation for practice is to continue qualitative research on teacher perspectives about the topic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore secondary teachers' perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. I used purposive sampling to recruit and interview 11 elite secondary teachers about their perspectives of promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Participants in the current study

shared valuable insights into the topic. The data showed that to promote belongingness for marginalized students, secondary teachers must emphasize teacher–student interactions, attend to personal growth, and develop a caring stance through intentional, empathy-oriented practices centered on the four ethical elements of care described by Tronto (1993). Efficient care that leads to belongingness for marginalized students can happen when secondary teachers are attentive to the belongingness needs of marginalized students, when teachers feel a responsibility to care for those belongingness needs, when teachers have the competence to adequately promote belongingness, and when teachers regularly seek and are responsive to student feedback about belongingness. Furthermore, caring for oneself, seeking to heal one’s inner wounds, and engaging in critical self-reflection about one’s caring interactions with others allows secondary teachers to pay attention to the belongingness needs of marginalized students.

Finally, this study fills a gap in the literature related to understanding secondary teachers’ perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

Secondary teachers, educational leaders, and teacher educators may use the insights gained from this study to better promote belongingness for marginalized students. As a result, marginalized students may experience improved levels of belongingness, leading to higher rates of academic achievement and well-being. Every student deserves to hear what P6 tells her students every year: “I see a future with you in it.”

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introductory Script

Welcome, and thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study.

Before getting started, I need to confirm that you meet the criteria for participation in the study.

1. First, can you tell me what grade level you are currently teaching?
2. Next, are you an NNSTOY member or an NBCT?
 - a. *If NNSTOY*: In what state were you recognized?
 - b. *If NBCT*: What is your certificate area?
3. *If ineligible*: Unfortunately, you do not meet the criteria necessary for eligibility to participate in this study. I am so grateful for your willingness to support my research. If you would like, I can send you a summary of my findings after I complete my final report.
4. *If eligible*: Thank you. I am looking forward to learning more about your experiences with promoting belongingness for marginalized students.

As we begin, I would like to review the parameters for your participation. You have been identified as someone who has a valuable perspective to share about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Prior to this meeting, you received and confirmed an informed consent email that outlined the purpose of the study and how your interview responses will be used. Your participation in this interview is important and voluntary. This means that, even after agreeing to participate in this interview, you are free to withdraw your consent at any time without consequence. During the interview,

you may choose not to answer a question or request that the interview be stopped for any reason. By agreeing to participate in this study, you are giving me permission to conduct and record a one-time, in-depth interview with you that is expected to last for 60-75 minutes. There are no significant risks or benefits to being in the study. The audio recording of the interview will be stored on my personal computer in an encrypted file and will not be shared with anyone. Additionally, your identity will be masked throughout the process of data analysis and reporting. No identifying information, such as your name or location, will be included in my final dissertation. As a small thank-you gift for your participation in this interview today, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Do you give your consent to participate in this interview?

Please keep in mind that, for the purposes of this study, I am using bell hooks' (2015) definition of marginalization: "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body." In this study, I am focusing on students with identities that are marginalized by the broader society in which we live. Therefore, while there may be students whose perspectives or identities place them in the minority within their specific classroom or school community, in this study we are only considering those students for whom marginalization occurs at the systemic level. Additionally, the existing literature defines belongingness as a fundamental human need; a subjective feeling of being deeply connected to social groups, physical places, or individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021). Do you have any questions about these definitions of marginalization or belongingness before we begin?

Let's get started.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about the student population you serve?
2. Think back to a time in your career when you may have been less effective at promoting belongingness for marginalized students. What barriers got in the way of your ability to promote belongingness for marginalized students?
 - a. Do you think those barriers were unique to you or common among secondary teachers? *What makes you say that?*
 - b. Can you tell me about how you were able to overcome those barriers?
3. What strategies do you use to promote belongingness for marginalized students?
 - a. How do those strategies compare to the strategies you use to promote belongingness for nonmarginalized students?
4. Can you identify and describe some reasons why you are able to promote belongingness for marginalized students?
 - a. What experiences, perspectives, or supports have you had that contribute to your ability to promote belongingness for marginalized students?
5. How do you seek feedback from marginalized students to know when you are effective at promoting belongingness for them?
 - a. How do you respond when you find out that a strategy you are using to promote belongingness for marginalized students is not producing the expected results?

6. What do you think is important for secondary teachers to consider when seeking to promote belongingness for marginalized students?
7. Some authors state that teachers' critical self-reflection has a role to play in promoting belongingness for marginalized students. Can you describe any experiences you have had with critical self-reflection and student belongingness?
8. Is there anything I have not asked you about that you think would be important to include?

Possible follow-up prompts to use if I need to probe for more information after a question:

- Tell me more about....
- Could you give me a specific example of...?
- What do you mean by...?
- How does _____ compare with _____?

Concluding Script

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your perspectives about promoting belongingness for marginalized students. By the end of the week, I will send a code to redeem your \$50 Amazon gift card to the email address we have been using to correspond. Within the next 4 weeks, I will contact you via email to ask you to review a transcript of this interview to check for accuracy. This follow-up email may include up to three clarifying questions. Once the study is completed, I will share the full report with you via email. I am incredibly grateful to you for describing your experiences and

perspectives. I look forward to sharing your perspectives so that more educators and their students can benefit from your expertise.